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PUBLISHER: *Lawrence E. Spivak* EDITOR: *Ellery Queen*

Vol. 10, No. 49, DECEMBER 1947. *Published monthly by The American Mercury, Inc., at 25¢ a copy. Annual subscription $3.00 in U. S. and possessions, Canada, and in the countries of the Pan-American Union; $4.00 in all other countries. Publication office, Concord, N. H. Editorial and General offices, 570 Lexington Avenue, New York 22, N. Y.*

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Entered as second class matter August 28, 1941, at the post office at Concord, N. H., under the act of March 3, 1879.

Published also in a Talking-Record Edition by The American Printing House for the Blind, Louisville, Kentucky. Manufactured in the United States of America.

Cover and Typography by George Salter

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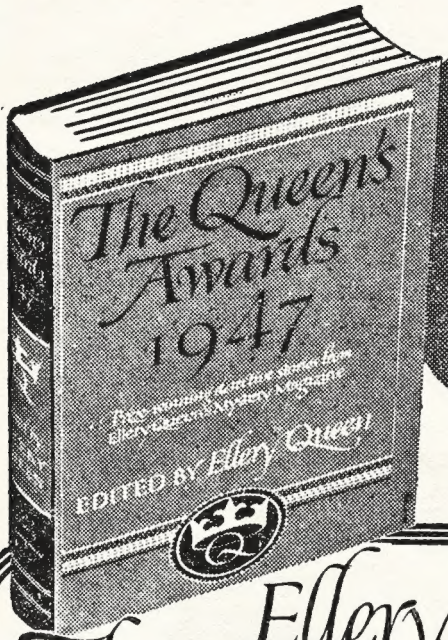

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THE SCORCHED FACE

by DASHIELL HAMMETT

"We expected them home yesterday," Alfred Banbrock wound up his story. "When they had not come by this morning, my wife telephoned Mrs. Walden. Mrs. Walden said they had not been down there — had not been expected, in fact."

"On the face of it, then," I suggested, "it seems that your daughters went away of their own accord, and are staying away on their own accord?"

Banbrock nodded gravely. Tired muscles sagged in his fleshy face.

"It would seem so," he agreed. "That is why I came to your agency for help instead of going to the police."

"Have they ever disappeared before?"

"No. If you read the papers and magazines, you've no doubt seen hints that the younger generation is given to irregularity. My daughters came and went pretty much as they pleased. But, though I can't say I ever knew what they were up to, we always knew where they were in a general way."

"Can you think of any reason for their going away like this?"

He shook his weary head.

"Any recent quarrels?" I probed.

"N —" He changed it to: "Yes — although I didn't attach any importance to it, and wouldn't have recalled it if you hadn't jogged my memory. It was Thursday evening — the evening before they went away."

"And it was about — ?"

"Money, of course. We never disagreed over anything else. I gave each of my daughters an adequate allowance — perhaps a very liberal one. Nor did I keep them strictly within it. There were few months in which they didn't exceed it. Thursday evening they asked for an amount of money even more than usual in excess of what two girls should need. I wouldn't give it to them, though I finally did give them a somewhat smaller amount. We didn't exactly quarrel — not in the strict sense of the word — but there was a certain lack of friendliness between us."

"And it was after this disagreement that they said they were going down to Mrs. Walden's, in Monterey, for the week-end?"

"Possibly. I'm not sure of that point. I don't think I heard of it until the next morning, but they may have told my wife before that. I shall ask her if you wish."

"And you know of no other possible reason for their running away?"

"None. I can't think that our dispute over money — by no means an unusual one — had anything to do with it."

"What does their mother think?"

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"Their mother is dead," Banbrock corrected me. "My wife is their step-mother. She is only two years older than Myra, my older daughter. She is as much at sea as I."

"Did your daughters and their step-mother get along all right together?"

"Yes! Yes! Excellently! If there was a division in the family, I usually found them standing together against me."

"Your daughters left Friday afternoon?"

"At noon, or a few minutes after. They were going to drive down."

"The car, of course, is still missing?"

"Naturally."

"What was it?"

"A Locomobile, with a special cabriolet body. Black."

"You can give me the license and engine numbers?"

"I think so."

He turned in his chair to the big roll-top desk that hid a quarter of one office wall, fumbled with papers in a compartment, and read the numbers over his shoulder to me. I put them on the back of an envelope.

"I'm going to have this car put on the police department list of stolen machines," I told him. "It can be done without mentioning your daughters. The police bulletin might find the car for us. That would help us find your daughters."

"Very well," he agreed, "if it can be done without disagreeable publicity. As I told you at first, I don't want any more advertising than is absolutely necessary — unless it becomes likely that harm has come to the girls."

I nodded understanding, and got up.

"I want to go out and talk to your wife," I said. "Is she home now?"

"Yes, I think so. I'll phone her and tell her you are coming."

In a big limestone fortress on top a hill in Sea Cliff, looking down on ocean and bay, I had my talk with Mrs. Banbrock. She was a tall dark girl of not more than twenty-two years, inclined to plumpness.

She couldn't tell me anything her husband hadn't at least mentioned, but she could give me finer details.

I got descriptions of the two girls:

Myra — 20 years old; 5 feet 8 inches; 150 pounds; athletic; brisk, almost masculine manner and carriage; bobbed brown hair; brown eyes; medium complexion; square face, with large chin and short nose; scar over left ear, concealed by hair; fond of horses and all outdoor sports. When she left the house she wore a blue and green wool dress, small blue hat, short black seal coat, and black slippers.

Ruth — 18 years; 5 feet 4 inches; 105 pounds; brown eyes; brown bobbed hair; medium complexion; small oval face; quiet, timid, inclined to lean on her more forceful sister. When last seen she had worn a tobacco-brown coat trimmed with brown fur over a gray silk dress, and a wide brown hat.

I got two photographs of each girl,

and an additional snapshot of Myra standing in front of the cabriolet. I got a list of the things they had taken with them — such things as would naturally be taken on a week-end visit. What I valued most of what I got was a list of their friends, relatives, and other acquaintances, so far as Mrs. Banbrock knew them.

"Did they mention Mrs. Walden's invitation before their quarrel with Mr. Banbrock?" I asked, when I had my lists stowed away.

"I don't think so," Mrs. Banbrock said thoughtfully. "I didn't connect the two things at all. They didn't really quarrel with their father, you know. It wasn't harsh enough to be called a quarrel."

"Did you see them when they left?"

"Assuredly! They left at about half-past twelve Friday afternoon. They kissed me as usual when they went, and there was certainly nothing in their manner to suggest anything out of the ordinary."

"You've no idea at all where they might have gone?"

"None."

"Can't even make a guess?"

"I can't. Among the names and addresses I have given you are some of friends and relatives of the girls in other cities. They may have gone to one of those. Do you think we should — ?"

"I'll take care of that," I promised. "Could you pick out one or two of them as the most likely places for the girls to have gone?"

She wouldn't try it.

"No," she said positively, "I could not."

From this interview I went back to the Agency, and put the Agency machinery in motion; arranging to have operatives from some of the Continental's other branches call on the out-of-town names on my list; having the missing Locomobile put on the police department list; turning one photograph of each girl over to a photographer to be copied.

That done, I set out to talk to the persons on the list Mrs. Banbrock had given me. My first call was on a Constance Delee, in an apartment building on Post Street. I saw a maid. The maid said Miss Delee was out of town. She wouldn't tell me where her mistress was, or when she would be back.

From there I went up on Van Ness Avenue and found a Wayne Ferris in an automobile salesroom: a sleek-haired young man whose very nice manners and clothes completely hid anything else — brains for instance — he might have had. He was very willing to help me, and he knew nothing. It took him a long time to tell me so. A nice boy.

Another blank: "Mrs. Scott is in Honolulu."

In a real estate office on Montgomery Street I found my next one — another sleek, stylish, smooth-haired young man with nice manners and nice clothes. His name was Raymond Elwood. I would have thought him a no more distant relative of Ferris than cousin if I hadn't known that the world — especially the dancing, tea-

ing world — was full of their sort. I learned nothing from him.

Then I drew some more blanks: "Out of town," "Shopping," "I don't know where you can find him."

I found one more of the Banbrock girls' friends before I called it a day. Her name was Mrs. Stewart Correll. She lived in Presidio Terrace, not far from the Banbrocks. She was a small woman, or girl, of about Mrs. Banbrock's age. A little fluffy blonde person with wide eyes of that particular blue which always looks honest and candid no matter what is going on behind it.

"I haven't seen either Ruth or Myra for two weeks or more," she said in answer to my question.

"At that time — the last time you saw them — did either say anything about going away?"

"No."

Her eyes were wide and frank. A little muscle twitched in her upper lip.

"And you've no idea where they might have gone?"

"No."

Her fingers were rolling her lace handkerchief into a little ball.

"Have you heard from them since you last saw them?"

"No."

She moistened her mouth before she said it.

"Will you give me the names and addresses of all the people you know who were also known by the Banbrock girls?"

"Why — ? Is there — ?"

"There's a chance that some of them may have seen them more recently than you," I explained. "Or may even have seen them since Friday."

Without enthusiasm, she gave me a dozen names. All were already on my list. Twice she hesitated as if about to speak a name she did not want to speak. Her eyes stayed on mine, wide and honest. Her fingers, no longer balling the handkerchief, picked at the cloth of her skirt.

I didn't pretend to believe her. But my feet weren't solidly enough on the ground for me to put her on the grill. I gave her a promise before I left, one that she could get a threat out of if she liked.

"Thanks, very much," I said. "I know it's hard to remember things exactly. If I run across anything that will help your memory, I'll be back to let you know about it."

"Wha — ? Yes, do!" she said.

Walking away from the house, I turned my head to look back just before I passed out of sight. A curtain swung into place at a second-floor window. The street lights weren't bright enough for me to be sure the curtain had swung in front of a blonde head.

My watch told me it was nine-thirty: too late to line up any more of the girls' friends. I went home, wrote my report for the day, and turned in, thinking more about Mrs. Correll than about the girls.

She seemed worth an investigation.

Some telegraphic reports were in when I got to the office the next

morning. None was of any value. Investigation of the names and addresses in other cities had revealed nothing. An investigation in Monterey had established reasonably — which is about as well as anything is ever established in the detecting business — that the girls had not been there recently; that the Locomobile had not been there.

The early editions of the afternoon papers were on the street when I went out to get some breakfast before taking up the grind where I had dropped it the previous night. I bought a paper to prop behind my grapefruit.

It spoiled my breakfast for me.

BANKER'S WIFE SUICIDE

Mrs. Stewart Correll, wife of the vice-president of the Golden Gate Trust Company, was found dead early this morning by her maid in her bedroom, in her home in Presidio Terrace. A bottle believed to have contained poison was on the floor beside the bed.

The dead woman's husband could give no reason for his wife's suicide. He said she had not seemed depressed or . . .

I gave my eggs and toast a quick play, put my coffee down in a lump, and got going.

At the Correll residence I had to do a lot of talking before I could get to Correll. He was a tall, slim man of less than thirty-five, with a sallow, nervous face and blue eyes that fidgeted.

"I'm sorry to disturb you at a time like this," I apologized when I had finally insisted my way into his presence. "I won't take up more of your time than necessary. I am an operative of the Continental Detective Agency. I have been trying to find Ruth and Myra Banbrock, who disappeared several days ago. You know them, I think."

"Yes," he said without interest. "I know them."

"You knew they had disappeared?"

"No." His eyes switched from a chair to a rug. "Why should I?"

"Have you seen either of them recently?" I asked, ignoring his question.

"Last week — Wednesday, I think. They were just leaving — standing at the door talking to my wife — when I came home from the bank."

"Didn't your wife say anything to you about their vanishing?"

"No. Really, I can't tell you anything about the Misses Banbrock. If you'll excuse me —"

"Just a moment longer," I said. "I wouldn't have bothered you if it hadn't been necessary. I was here last night, to question Mrs. Correll. She seemed nervous. My impression was that some of her answers to my questions were — uh — evasive. I want —"

He was up out of his chair. His face was red in front of mine.

"You!" he cried. "I can thank you for —"

"Now, Mr. Correll," I tried to quiet him, "there's no use —"

But he had himself all worked up.

"You drove my wife to her death," he accused me. "You killed her with your damned prying — with your

bulldozing threats; with your —"

That was silly. I felt sorry for this young man whose wife had killed herself. Apart from that, I had work to do. I tightened the screws.

"We won't argue, Correll," I told him. "The point is that I came here to see if your wife could tell me anything about the Banbrocks. She told me less than the truth. Later, she committed suicide. I want to know why. Come through for me, and I'll do what I can to keep the papers and the public from linking her death with the girls' disappearance."

"Linking her death with their disappearance?" he exclaimed. "That's absurd!"

"Maybe, — but the connection is there!" I hammered away at him. I felt sorry for him, but I had work to do. "It's there. If you'll give it to me, maybe it won't have to be advertised. I'm going to get it, though. You give it to me — or I'll go after it out in the open."

For a moment I thought he was going to take a poke at me. I wouldn't have blamed him. His body stiffened — then sagged, and he dropped back into his chair. His eyes fidgeted away from mine.

"There's nothing I can tell," he mumbled. "When her maid went to her room to call her this morning, she was dead. There was no message, no reason, nothing."

"Did you see her last night?"

"No. I was not home for dinner. I came in late and went straight to my own room, not wanting to disturb her. I hadn't seen her since I left the house that morning."

"Did she seem disturbed or worried then?"

"No."

"Why do you think she did it?"

"My God, man, I don't know! I've thought and thought, but I don't know!"

"Health?"

"She seemed well. She was never ill, never complained."

"Any recent quarrels?"

"We never quarreled — never in the year and a half we have been married!"

"Financial trouble?"

He shook his head without speaking or looking up from the floor.

"Any other worry?"

He shook his head again.

"Did the maid notice anything peculiar in her behavior last night?"

"Nothing."

"Have you looked through her things — for papers, letters?"

"Yes — and found nothing." He raised his head to look at me. "The only thing" — he spoke very slowly — "there was a little pile of ashes in the grate in her room, as if she had burned papers, or letters."

Correll held nothing more for me — nothing I could get out of him, anyway.

The girl at the front gate in Alfred Banbrock's Shoreman's Building suite told me he was *in conference*. I sent my name in. He came out of conference to take me into his private office. His tired face was full of questions.

. I didn't keep him waiting for the answers. He was a grown man. I didn't edge around the bad news.

"Things have taken a bad break," I said as soon as we were locked in together. "I think we'll have to go to the police and newspapers for help. A Mrs. Correll, a friend of your daughters, lied to me when I questioned her yesterday. Last night she committed suicide."

"Irma Correll? Suicide?"

"You knew her?"

"Yes! Intimately! She is — that is, she was a close friend of my wife and daughters. She killed herself?"

"Yes. Poison. Last night. Where does she fit in with your daughters' disappearance?"

"Where?" he repeated. "I don't know. Must she fit in?"

"I think she must. She told me she hadn't seen your daughters for a couple of weeks. Her husband told me just now that they were talking to her when he came home from the bank last Wednesday afternoon. She seemed nervous when I questioned her. She killed herself shortly afterward. There's hardly a doubt that she fits in somewhere."

"And that means — ?"

"That means," I finished for him, "that your daughters may be perfectly safe, but that we can't afford to gamble on that possibility."

"You think harm has come to them?"

"I don't think anything," I evaded, "except that with a death tied up closely with their going, we can't afford to play around."

Banbrock got his attorney on the phone — a pink-faced, white-haired old boy named Norwall, who had the reputation of knowing more about corporations than all the Morgans, but who hadn't the least idea as to what police procedure was all about — and told him to meet us at the Hall of Justice.

We spent an hour and a half there, getting the police turned loose on the affair, and giving the newspapers what we wanted them to have. That was plenty of dope on the girls, plenty of photographs and so forth; but nothing about the connection between them and Mrs. Correll. Of course we let the police in on that angle.

After Banbrock and his attorney had gone away together, I went back to the detectives' assembly room to chew over the job with Pat Reddy, the police sleuth assigned to it.

Pat was the youngest member of the detective bureau — a big blond Irishman who went in for the spectacular in his lazy way.

A couple of years ago he was a new copper, pounding his feet in harness on a hillside beat. One night he tagged an automobile that was parked in front of a fireplug. The owner came out just then and gave him an argument. She was Althea Wallach, only and spoiled daughter of the owner of the Wallach Coffee Company — a slim, reckless youngster with hot eyes. She must have told Pat plenty. He took her over to the station and dumped her in a cell.

Old Wallach, so the story goes, showed up the next morning with a full head of steam and half the lawyers in San Francisco. But Pat made his charge stick, and the girl was fined. Old Wallach did everything but take a punch at Pat in the corridor afterward. Pat grinned his sleepy grin at the coffee importer, and drawled:

"You better lay off me — or I'll stop drinking your coffee."

That crack got into most of the newspapers in the country, and even into a Broadway show.

But Pat didn't stop with the snappy come-back. Three days later he and Althea Wallach went over to Alameda and got themselves married. I was in on that part. I happened to be on the ferry they took, and they dragged me along to see the deed done.

Old Wallach immediately disowned his daughter, but that didn't seem to worry anybody else. Pat went on pounding his beat, but, now that he was conspicuous, it wasn't long before his qualities were noticed. He was boosted into the detective bureau. Old Wallach relented before he died, and left Althea both of his millions.

Pat took the afternoon off to go to the funeral, and went back to work that night, catching a wagonload of gunmen. He kept on working. I don't know what his wife did with her money, but Pat didn't even improve the quality of his cigars — though he should have. He lived now in the Wallach mansion, true enough, and now and then on rainy mornings he would be driven down to the Hall in a Hispano-Suiza brougham; but there was no difference in him beyond that.

That was the big blond Irishman who sat across a desk from me in the assembly room and fumigated me with something shaped like a cigar.

He took the cigar-like thing out of his mouth presently, and spoke through the fumes.

"This Correll woman you think's tied up with the Banbrocks — she was stuck-up a couple of months back and nicked for eight hundred dollars. Know that?"

I hadn't known it.

"Lose anything besides cash?" I asked.

"No."

"You believe it?"

He grinned.

"That's the point," he said. "We didn't catch the bird who did it. With women who lose things that way — especially money — it's always a question whether it's a hold-up or a hold-out."

He teased some more poison-gas out of the cigar-thing, and added:

"The hold-up might have been on the level, though. What are you figuring on doing now?"

"Let's go up to the Agency and see if anything new has turned up. Then I'd like to talk to Mrs. Banbrock again. Maybe she can tell us something about the Correll woman."

At the office I found that reports had come in on the rest of the out-of-town names and addresses. Apparently none of these people knew anything about the girls' whereabouts. Reddy

and I went on up to Sea Cliff to the Banbrock home.

Banbrock had telephoned the news of Mrs. Correll's death to his wife, and she had read the papers. She told us she could think of no reason for the suicide. She could imagine no possible connection between the suicide and her stepdaughters' vanishing.

"Mrs. Correll seemed as nearly contented and happy as usual the last time I saw her, two or three weeks ago," Mrs. Banbrock said. "Of course she was by nature inclined to be dissatisfied with things, but not to the extent of doing a thing like this."

"Do you know of any trouble between her and her husband?"

"No. So far as I know, they were happy, though —"

She broke off. Hesitancy, embarrassment showed in her dark eyes.

"Though?" I repeated.

"If I don't tell you now, you'll think I am hiding something," she said, flushing, and laughing a little laugh that held more nervousness than amusement. "It hasn't any bearing, but I was always just a little jealous of Irma. She and my husband were — well, everyone thought they would marry. That was a little before he and I married. I never let it show, and I dare say it was a foolish idea, but I always had a suspicion that Irma married Stewart more in pique than for any other reason, and that she was still fond of Alfred — Mr. Banbrock."

"Was there anything definite to make you think that?"

"No, nothing — really! I never thoroughly believed it. It was just a sort of vague feeling. Cattiness, no doubt, more than anything else."

It was getting along toward evening when Pat and I left the Banbrock house. Before we knocked off for the day, I called up the Old Man — the Continental's San Francisco branch manager, and therefore my boss — and asked him to sic an operative on Irma Correll's past.

I took a look at the morning papers — thanks to their custom of appearing almost as soon as the sun is out of sight — before I went to bed. They had given our job a good spread. All the facts except those having to do with the Correll angle were there, plus photographs, and the usual assortment of guesses and similar garbage.

The following morning I went after the friends of the missing girls to whom I had not yet talked. I found some of them, and got nothing of value from them. Late in the morning I telephoned the office to see if anything new had turned up.

It had.

"We've just had a call from the sheriff's office at Martinez," the Old Man told me. "An Italian grape-grower near Knob Valley picked up a charred photograph a couple of days ago, and recognized it as Ruth Banbrock when he saw her picture in this morning's paper. Will you get up there? A deputy sheriff and the Italian are waiting for you in the Knob Valley marshal's office."

"I'm on my way," I said.

At the ferry building I used the

four minutes before my boat left trying to get Pat Reddy on the phone, with no success.

Knob Valley is a town of less than a thousand people, a dreary, dirty town in Contra Costa county. A San Francisco-Sacramento local set me down there while the afternoon was still young.

I knew the marshal slightly — Tom Orth. I found two men in the office with him. Orth introduced us. Abner Paget, a gawky man of forty-something, with a slack chin, scrawny face, and pale intelligent eyes, was the deputy sheriff. Gio Cereghino, the Italian grapegrower, was a small, nut-brown man with strong yellow teeth that showed in an everlasting smile under his black mustache, and soft brown eyes.

Paget showed me the photograph. A scorched piece of paper the size of a half-dollar, apparently all that had not been burned of the original picture. It was Ruth Banbrock's face. There was little room for doubting that. She had a peculiarly excited — almost drunken — look, and her eyes were larger than in the other pictures of her I had seen. But it was her face.

"He says he found it day 'fore yesterday," Paget explained dryly, nodding at the Italian. "The wind blew it against his foot when he was walkin' up a piece of road near his place. He picked it up an' stuck it in his pocket, he says, for no special reason, I guess, except maybe that guineas like pictures."

He paused to regard the Italian meditatively. The Italian nodded his head in vigorous affirmation.

"Anyways," the deputy sheriff went on, "he was in town this mornin', an' seen the pictures in the papers from 'Frisco. So he come in here an' told Tom about it. Tom an' me decided the best thing was to phone your agency — since the papers said you was workin' on it."

I looked at the Italian.

Paget, reading my mind, explained: "Cereghino lives over in the hills. Got a grape-ranch there. Been around here five or six years, an' ain't killed nobody that I know of."

"Remember the place where you found the picture?" I asked the Italian.

His grin broadened under his mustache, and his head went up and down.

"For sure, I remember that place."

"Let's go there," I suggested to Paget.

"Right. Comin' along, Tom?"

The marshal said he couldn't. He had something to do in town. Cereghino, Paget and I went out and got into a dusty Ford that the deputy sheriff drove.

We rode for nearly an hour, along a county road that bent up the slope of Mount Diablo. After a while, at a word from the Italian, we left the county road for a dustier and ruttier one.

A mile of this one.

"This place," Cereghino said.

Paget stopped the Ford. We got out in a clearing. The trees and bushes that had crowded the road retreated

here for twenty feet or so on either side, leaving a dusty circle in the woods.

"About this place," the Italian was saying. "I think by this stump. But between that bend ahead and that one behind, I know for sure."

Paget was a countryman. I am not. I waited for him to move.

He looked around the clearing, slowly, standing still between the Italian and me. His pale eyes lighted presently. He went around the Ford to the far side of the clearing. Cereghino and I followed.

Near the fringe of brush at the edge of the clearing, the scrawny deputy stopped to grunt at the ground. The wheel-marks of an automobile were there. A car had turned around here.

Paget went on into the woods. The Italian kept close to his heels. I brought up the rear. Paget was following some sort of track. I couldn't see it, either because he and the Italian blotted it out ahead of me, or because I'm a shine Indian.

We went back quite a way.

Paget stopped. The Italian stopped.

Paget said, "Uh-huh," as if he had found an expected thing.

The Italian said something with the name of God in it.

I trampled a bush, coming beside them to see what they saw.

I saw it.

At the base of a tree, on her side, her knees drawn up close to her body, a girl was dead.

She wasn't nice to see. Birds had been at her.

A tobacco-brown coat was half on, half off her shoulders. I knew she was Ruth Banbrock before I turned her over to look at the side of her face the ground had saved from the birds.

Cereghino stood watching me while I examined the girl. His face was mournful in a calm way. The deputy sheriff paid little attention to the body. He was off in the brush, moving around, looking at the ground.

He came back as I finished my examination.

"Shot," I told him, "once in the right temple. Before that, I think, there was a fight. There are marks on the arm that was under her body. There's nothing on her — no jewelry, money — nothing."

"That goes," Paget said. "Two women got out of the car back in the clearin', an' came here. Could've been three women — if the others carried this one. Can't make out how many went back. One of 'em was larger than this one. There was a scuffle here. Find the gun?"

"No," I said.

"Neither did I. It went away in the car, then. There's what's left of a fire over there." He ducked his head to the left. "Paper an' rags burnt. Not enough left to do us any good. I reckon the photo Cereghino found blew away from the fire. Late Friday, I'd put it, or maybe Saturday mornin'. . . . No nearer than that."

I took the deptuy sheriff's word for it. He seemed to know his stuff.

"Come here. I'll show you somethin'," he said, and led me over to a

little black pile of ashes.

He hadn't anything to show me. He wanted to talk to me away from the Italian's ears.

"I think the guinea's all right," he said, "but I reckon I'd best hold him a while to make sure. This is some way from his place, an' he stuttered a little bit too much tellin' me how he happened to be passin' here. Course, that don't mean nothin' much. All these guineas peddle *vino*, an' I guess that's what brought him out this way. I'll hold him a day or two, anyways."

"Good," I agreed. "This is your country, and you know the people. Can you visit around and see what you can pick up? Whether anybody saw anything? Saw a Locomobile cabriolet? Or anything else? You can get more than I could."

"I'll do that," he promised.

"All right. Then I'll go back to San Francisco now. I suppose you'll want to camp here with the body?"

"Yeah. You drive the Ford back to Knob Valley, an' tell Tom what's what. He'll come or send out. I'll keep the guinea here with me."

Waiting for the next west-bound train out of Knob Valley, I got the office on the telephone. The Old Man was out. I told my story to one of the office men and asked him to get the news to the Old Man as soon as he could.

Everybody was in the office when I got back to San Francisco. Alfred Banbrock, his face a pink-gray that was deader than solid gray could have been. His pink and white old lawyer. Pat Reddy, sprawled on his spine with his feet on another chair. The Old Man, with his gentle eyes behind gold spectacles and his mild smile, hiding the fact that fifty years of sleuthing had left him without any feelings at all on any subject. (Whitey Clayton used to say the Old Man could spit icicles in August.)

Nobody said anything when I came in. I said my say as briefly as possible.

"Then the other woman — the woman who killed Ruth was — ?"

Banbrock didn't finish his question. Nobody answered it.

"We don't know what happened," I said after a while. "Your daughter and someone we don't know may have gone there. Your daughter may have been dead before she was taken there. She may have —"

"But Myra!" Banbrock was pulling at his collar with a finger inside. "Where is Myra?"

I couldn't answer that, nor could any of the others.

"You are going up to Knob Valley now?" I asked him.

"Yes, at once. You will come with me?"

I wasn't sorry I could not.

"No. There are things to be done here. I'll give you a note to the marshal. I want you to look carefully at the piece of your daughter's photograph the Italian found — to see if you remember it."

Banbrock and the lawyer left.

Reddy lit one of his awful cigars.

"We found the car," the Old Man said. "In Sacramento. It was left in a

garage there either late Friday night or early Saturday. Foley has gone up to investigate it. And Reddy has uncovered a new angle."

Pat nodded through his smoke.

"A hock-shop dealer came in this morning," Pat said, "and told us that Myra Banbrock and another girl came to his joint last week and hocked a lot of stuff. They gave him phony names, but he swears one of them was Myra. He recognized her picture as soon as he saw it in the paper. Her companion wasn't Ruth. It was a little blonde."

"Mrs. Correll?"

"Uh-huh. The shark can't swear to that, but I think that's the answer. Some of the jewelry was Myra's, some Ruth's, and some we don't know. I mean we can't prove it belonged to Mrs. Correll — though we will."

"When did all this happen?"

"They soaked the stuff Monday before they went away."

"Have you seen Correll?"

"Uh-huh," Pat said. "I did a lot of talking to him, but the answers weren't worth much. He says he don't know whether any of her jewelry is gone or not, and doesn't care. It was hers, he says, and she could do anything she wanted with it. He was kind of disagreeable. I got along a little better with one of the maids. She says some of Mrs. Correll's pretties disappeared last week. Mrs. Correll said she had lent them to a friend. I'm going to show the stuff the hock-shop has to the maid tomorrow, to see if she can identify it. She didn't know anything else — except that Mrs. Correll was out of the picture for a while on Friday — the day the Banbrock girls went away."

"What do you mean, out of the picture?" I asked.

"She went out late in the morning and didn't show up until somewhere around three the next morning. She and Correll had a row over it, but she wouldn't tell him where she had been."

I liked that. It could mean something.

"And," Pat went on, "Correll has just remembered that his wife had an uncle who went crazy in Pittsburgh in 1902, and that she had a morbid fear of going crazy herself, and that she had often said she would kill herself if she thought she was going crazy. Wasn't it nice of him to remember those things at last? To account for her death?"

"It was," I agreed, "but it doesn't get us anywhere. It doesn't even prove that he knows anything. Now my guess is —"

"To hell with your guess," Pat said, getting up and pushing his hat in place. "Your guesses all sound like a lot of static to me. I'm going home, eat my dinner, read my Bible, and go to bed."

I suppose he did. Anyway, he left us.

We all might as well have spent the next three days in bed for all the profit that came out of our running around. No place we visited, nobody we ques-

tioned, added to our knowledge. We were in a blind alley.

We learned that the Locomobile was left in Sacramento by Myra Banbrock, and not by anyone else, but we didn't learn where she went afterward. We learned that some of the jewelry in the pawnshop was Mrs. Correll's. The Locomobile was brought back from Sacramento. Mrs. Correll was buried. Ruth Banbrock was buried. The newspapers found other mysteries. Reddy and I dug and dug, and all we brought up was dirt.

The following Monday brought me close to the end of my rope. There seemed nothing more to do but sit back and hope that the circulars with which we had plastered North America would bring results. Reddy had already been called off and put to running out fresher trails. I hung on because Banbrock wanted me to keep at it so long as there was the shadow of anything to keep at. But by Monday I had worked myself out.

Before going to Banbrock's office to tell him I was licked, I dropped in at the Hall of Justice to hold a wake over the job with Pat Reddy. He was crouched over his desk, writing a report on some other job.

"Hello!" he greeted me, pushing his report away and smearing it with ashes from his cigar. "How do the Banbrock doings?"

"They don't," I admitted. "It doesn't seem possible, with the stack-up what it is, that we should have come to a dead stop! It's there for us, if we can find it. The need of money before both the Banbrock and the Correll calamities: Mrs. Correll's suicide after I had questioned her about the girls; her burning things before she died and the burning of things immediately before or after Ruth Banbrock's death."

"Maybe the trouble is," Pat suggested, "that you're not such a good sleuth."

"Maybe."

We smoked in silence for a minute or two after that insult.

"You understand," Pat said presently, "there doesn't have to be any connection between the Banbrock death and disappearance and the Correll death."

"Maybe not. But there has to be a connection between the Banbrock death and the Banbrock disappearance. There was a connection — in a pawnshop — between the Banbrock and Correll actions before these things. If there is that connection, then —"

I broke off, all full of ideas.

"What's the matter?" Pat asked. "Swallow your gum?"

"Listen!" I let myself get almost enthusiastic. "We've got what happened to three women hooked up together. If we could tie up some more in the same string — I want the names and addresses of all the women and girls in San Francisco who have committed suicide, been murdered, or disappeared within the past year."

"You think this is a wholesale deal?"

"I think the more we can tie up to-

gether, the more lines we'll have to run out. And they can't all lead nowhere. Let's get our list, Pat!"

We spent all the afternoon and most of the night getting it. Its size would have embarrassed the Chamber of Commerce. It looked like a hunk of the telephone book. Things happen in a city in a year. The section devoted to strayed wives and daughters was the largest; suicides next; and even the smallest division — murders — wasn't any too short.

We could check off most of the names against what the police department had already learned of them and their motives, weeding out those positively accounted for in a manner nowise connected with our present interest. The remainder we split into two classes; those of unlikely connection, and those of more possible connection. Even then, the second list was longer than I had expected, or hoped.

There were six suicides in it, three murders, and twenty-one disappearances.

Reddy had other work to do. I put the list in my pocket and went calling.

For four days I ground at the list. I hunted, found, questioned, and investigated friends and relatives of the women and girls on my list. My questions all hit in the same direction. Had she been acquainted with Myra Banbrock? Ruth? Mrs. Correll? Had she been in need of money before her death or disappearance? Had she destroyed anything before her death or disappearance? Had she known any of the other women on my list?

Three times I drew yeses.

Sylvia Varney, a girl of twenty, who had killed herself on November 5th, had drawn six hundred dollars from the bank the week before her death. No one in her family could say what she had done with the money. A friend of Sylvia Varney's — Ada Youngman, a married woman of twenty-five or -six — had disappeared on December 2nd, and was still gone. The Varney girl had been at Mrs. Youngman's home an hour before she — the Varney girl — killed herself.

Mrs. Dorothy Sawdon, a young widow, had shot herself on the night of January 13th. No trace was found of either the money her husband had left her or the funds of a club whose treasurer she was. A bulky letter her maid remembered having given her that afternoon was never found.

These three women's connection with the Banbrock-Correll affair was sketchy enough. None of them had done anything that isn't done by nine out of ten women who kill themselves or run away. But the troubles of all three had come to a head within the past few months — and all three were women of about the same financial and social position as Mrs. Correll and the Banbrocks.

Finishing my list with no fresh leads, I came back to these three.

I had the names and addresses of sixty-two friends of the Banbrock girls. I set about getting the same sort of catalogue on the three women I was trying to bring into the game. I

didn't have to do all the digging myself. Fortunately, there were two or three operatives in the office with nothing else to do just then.

We got something.

Mrs. Sawdon had known Raymond Elwood. Sylvia Varney had known Raymond Elwood. There was nothing to show Mrs. Youngman had known him, but it was likely she had. She and the Varney girl had been thick.

I had already interviewed this Raymond Elwood in connection with the Banbrock girls, but had paid no especial attention to him. I had considered him just one of the sleek-headed, high-polished young men of whom there was quite a few listed.

I went back at him, all interest now. The results were promising.

He had, as I have said, a real estate office on Montgomery Street. We were unable to find a single client he had ever served, or any signs of one's existence. He had an apartment out in the Sunset District, where he lived alone. His local record seemed to go back no farther than ten months, though we couldn't find its definite starting point. Apparently he had no relatives in San Francisco. He belonged to a couple of fashionable clubs. He was vaguely supposed to be "well connected in the East." He spent money.

I couldn't shadow Elwood, having too recently interviewed him. Dick Foley did. Elwood was seldom in his office during the first three days Dick tailed him. He was seldom in the financial district. He visited his clubs, he danced and teaed and so forth, and each of those three days he visited a house on Telegraph Hill.

The first afternoon Dick had him, Elwood went to the Telegraph Hill house with a tall fair girl from Burlingame. The second day — in the evening — with a plump young woman who came out of a house out on Broadway. The third evening with a very young girl who seemed to live in the same building as he.

Usually Elwood and his companion spent from three to four hours in the house on Telegraph Hill. Other people — all apparently well-to-do — went in and out of the house while it was under Dick's eye.

I climbed Telegraph Hill to give the house the up-and-down. It was a large house — a big frame house painted egg-yellow. It hung dizzily on a shoulder of the hill, a shoulder that was sharp where rock had been quarried away. The house seemed about to go ski-ing down on the roofs far below.

It had no immediate neighbors. The approach was screened by bushes and trees.

I gave that section of the hill a good strong play, calling at all the houses within shooting distance of the yellow one. Nobody knew anything about it, or about its occupants. The folks on the Hill aren't a curious lot — perhaps because most of them have something to hide themselves.

My climbing uphill and downhill got me nothing until I succeeded in learning who owned the yellow house.

The owner was an estate whose affairs were in the hands of the West Coast Trust Company.

I took my investigations to the trust company, with some satisfaction. The house had been leased eight months ago by Raymond Elwood, acting for a client named T. F. Maxwell.

We couldn't find Maxwell. We couldn't find anybody who knew Maxwell. We couldn't find any evidence that Maxwell was anything but a name.

One of the operatives went up to the yellow house on the hill, and rang the bell for half an hour with no result. We didn't try that again, not wanting to stir things up at this stage.

I made another trip up the hill, house-hunting. I couldn't find a place as near the yellow house as I would have liked, but I succeeded in renting a three-room flat from which the approach to it could be watched.

Dick and I camped in the flat — with Pat Reddy, when he wasn't off on other duties — and watched machines turn into the screened path that led to the egg-tinted house. Afternoon and night there were machines. Most of them carried women. We saw no one we could place as a resident of the house. Elwood came daily, once alone, the other time with women whose faces we couldn't see from our window.

We shadowed some of the visitors away. They were without exception reasonably well off financially, and some were socially prominent. We didn't go up against any of them with talk. Even a carefully planned pretext is as likely as not to tip your mitt when you're up against a blind game.

Three days of this — and our break came.

It was early evening, just dark. Pat Reddy had phoned that he had been up on a job for two days and a night, and was going to sleep the clock around. Dick and I were sitting at the window of our flat, watching automobiles turn toward the yellow house, writing down their license numbers as they passed through the blue-white patch of light an arc-lamp put in the road just beyond our window.

A woman came climbing the hill, afoot. She was a tall woman, strongly built. A dark veil, not thick enough to advertise the fact that she wore it to hide her features, nevertheless did hide them. Her way was up the hill, past our flat, on the other side of the roadway.

A night-wind from the Pacific was creaking a grocer's sign down below, swaying the arc-light above. The wind caught the woman as she passed out of our building's sheltered area. Coat and skirts tangled. She put her back to the wind, a hand to her hat. Her veil whipped out straight from her face.

Her face was a face from a photograph — Myra Banbrock's face.

Dick made her with me.

"Our Baby!" he cried, bouncing to his feet.

"Wait," I said. "She's going into the joint on the edge of the hill. Let her go. We'll go after her when she's

inside. That's our excuse for frisking the joint."

I went into the next room, where our telephone was, and called Pat Reddy's number.

"She didn't go in," Dick called from the window. "She went past the path."

"After her!" I ordered. "There's no sense to that! What's the matter with her?" I felt sort of indignant about it. "She's got to go in! Tail her. I'll find you after I get Pat."

Dick went.

Pat's wife answered the telephone. I told her who I was.

"Will you shake Pat out of the covers and send him up here? He knows where I am. Tell him I want him in a hurry."

"I will," she promised. "I'll have him there in ten minutes — wherever it is."

Outdoors, I went up the road, hunting for Dick and Myra Banbrock. Neither was in sight. Passing the bushes that masked the yellow house, I went on, circling down a stony path to the left. No sign of either.

I turned back in time to see Dick going into our flat. I followed.

"She's in," he said when I joined him. "She went up the road, cut across through some bushes, came back to the edge of the cliff, and slid feet-first through a cellar window."

That was nice. The crazier the people you are sleuthing act, as a rule, the nearer you are to an ending of your troubles.

Reddy arrived within a minute or two of the time his wife had promised. He came in buttoning his clothes.

"What the hell did you tell Althea?" he growled at me. "She gave me an overcoat to put over my pajamas, dumped the rest of my clothes in the car, and I had to get in them on the way over."

"I'll cry with you after awhile," I dismissed his troubles. "Myra Banbrock just went into the joint through a cellar window. Elwood has been there an hour. Let's knock it off."

Pat is deliberate.

"We ought to have papers, even at that," he stalled.

"Sure," I agreed, "but you can get them fixed up afterward. That's what you're here for. Contra Costa county wants her — maybe to try her for murder. That's all the excuse we need to get into the joint. We go there for her. If we happen to run into anything else — well and good."

Pat finished buttoning his vest.

"Oh, all right!" he said sourly. "Have it your way. But if you get me smashed for searching a house without authority, you'll have to give me a job with your law-breaking agency."

"I will." I turned to Foley. "You'll have to stay outside, Dick. Keep your eye on the getaway. Don't bother anybody else, but if the Banbrock girl gets out, stay behind her."

"I expected it," Dick howled. "Any time there's any fun I can count on being stuck off somewhere on a street corner!"

Pat Reddy and I went straight up

the bush-hidden path to the yellow house's front door, and rang the bell.

A big black man in a red fez, red silk jacket over red-striped silk shirt, red Zouave pants and red slippers, opened the door. He filled the opening, framed in the black of the hall behind him.

"Is Mr. Maxwell home?" I asked.

The black man shook his head and said words in a language I don't know.

"Mr. Elwood, then?"

Another shaking of the head. More strange language.

"Let's see whoever is home then," I insisted.

Out of the jumble of words that meant nothing to me, I picked three in garbled English, which I thought were "master," "not," and "home."

The door began to close. I put a foot against it.

Pat flashed his buzzer.

Though the black man had poor English, he had knowledge of police badges.

One of his feet stamped on the floor behind him. A gong boomed deafeningly in the rear of the house.

The black man bent his weight to the door.

My weight on the foot that blocked the door, I leaned sidewise, swaying to the negro.

Slamming from the hip, I put my fist in the middle of him.

Reddy hit the door and we went into the hall.

" 'Fore God, Fat Shorty," the black man gasped in good black Virginian, "you done hurt me!"

Reddy and I went by him, down the hall whose bounds were lost in darkness.

The bottom of a flight of steps stopped my feet.

A gun went off upstairs. It seemed to point at us. We didn't get the bullets.

A babel of voices — women screaming, men shouting — came and went upstairs; came and went as if a door was being opened and shut.

"Up, my boy!" Reddy yelped in my ear.

We went up the stairs. We didn't find the man who had shot at us.

At the head of the stairs, a door was locked. Reddy's bulk forced it.

We came into a bluish light. A large room, all purple and gold. Confusion of overturned furniture and rumpled rugs. A gray slipper lay near a far door. A green silk gown was in the center of the floor. No person was there.

I raced Pat to the curtained door beyond the slipper. The door was not locked. Reddy yanked it wide.

A room with three girls and a man crouching in a corner, fear in their faces. Neither of them was Myra Banbrock, or Raymond Elwood, or anyone we knew.

Our glances went away from them after the first quick look.

The open door across the room grabbed our attention.

The door gave to a small room.

The room was chaos.

A small room, packed and tangled with bodies. Live bodies, seething,

writhing. The room was a funnel into which men and women had been poured. They boiled noisily toward the one small window that was the funnel's outlet. Men and women, youths and girls, screaming, struggling, squirming, fighting. Some had no clothes.

"We'll get through and block the window!" Pat yelled in my ear.

"Like hell —" I began, but he was gone ahead into the confusion.

I went after him.

I didn't mean to block the window. I meant to save Pat from his foolishness. No five men could have fought through that boiling turmoil of maniacs. No ten men could have turned them from the window.

Pat — big as he is — was down when I got to him. A half dressed girl — a child — was driving at his face with sharp high-heels. Hands, feet, were tearing him apart.

I cleared him with a play of gun-barrel on shins and wrists — dragged him back.

"Myra's not there!" I yelled into his ear as I helped him up. "Elwood's not there!"

I wasn't sure, but I hadn't seen them, and I doubted that they would be in this mess. These savages, boiling again to the window, with no attention for us, whoever they were, weren't insiders. They were the mob, and the principals shouldn't be among them.

"We'll try the other rooms," I yelled again. "We don't want these."

Pat rubbed the back of his hand across his torn face and laughed.

"It's a cinch I don't want 'em any more," he said.

We went back to the head of the stairs the way we had come. We saw no one. The man and girls who had been in the next room were gone.

At the head of the stairs we paused. There was no noise behind us except the now fainter babel of the lunatics fighting for their exit.

A door shut sharply downstairs.

A body came out of nowhere, hit my back, flattened me to the landing.

The feel of silk was on my cheek. A brawny hand was fumbling at my throat.

I bent my wrist until my gun, upside down, lay against my cheek. Praying for my ear, I squeezed.

My cheek took fire. My head was a roaring thing, about to burst.

The silk slid away.

Pat hauled me upright.

We started down the stairs.

Swish!

A thing came past my face, stirring my bared hair.

A thousand pieces of glass, china, plaster, exploded upward at my feet.

I tilted head and gun together.

A Negro's red-silk arms were still spread over the balustrade above.

I sent him two bullets. Pat sent him two.

The Negro teetered over the rail.

He came down on us, arms outflung — a dead man's swan-dive.

We scurried down the stairs from under him.

He shook the house when he landed,

but we weren't watching him then.

The smooth sleek head of Raymond Elwood took our attention.

In the light from above, it showed for a furtive split-second around the newel-post at the foot of the stairs. Showed and vanished.

Pat Reddy, closer to the rail than I, went over it in a one-hand vault down into the blackness below.

I made the foot of the stairs in two jumps, jerked myself around with a hand on the newel, and plunged into the suddenly noisy dark of the hall.

A wall I couldn't see hit me. Caroming off the opposite wall, I spun into a room whose curtained grayness was the light of day after the hall.

Pat Reddy stood with one hand on a chair-back, holding his belly with the other. His face was mouse-colored under its blood. His eyes were glass agonies. He had the look of a man who had been kicked.

The grin he tried failed. He nodded toward the rear of the house. I went back.

In a little passageway I found Raymond Elwood.

He was sobbing and pulling frantically at a locked door. His face was the hard white of utter terror.

I measured the distance between us.

He turned as I jumped.

I put everything I had in the downswing of my gun-barrel —

A ton of meat and bone crashed into my back.

I went over against the wall, breathless, giddy, sick.

Red-silk arms that ended in brown hands locked around me.

I wondered if there was a whole regiment of these gaudy Negroes — or if I was colliding with the same one over and over.

This one didn't let me do much thinking.

He was big. He was strong. He didn't mean any good.

My gun-arm was flat at my side, straight down. I tried a shot at one of the Negro's feet. Missed. Tried again. He moved his feet. I wriggled around, half facing him.

Elwood piled on my other side.

The Negro bent me backward, folding my spine on itself like an accordion.

I fought to hold my knees stiff. Too much weight was hanging on me. My knees sagged. My body curved back.

Pat Reddy, swaying in the doorway, shone over the Negro's shoulder like the Angel Gabriel.

Gray pain was in Pat's face, but his eyes were clear. His right hand held a gun. His left was getting a blackjack out of his hip pocket.

He swung the sap down on the Negro's shaven skull.

The black man wheeled away from me, shaking his head.

Pat hit him once more before the Negro closed with him — hit him full in the face, but couldn't beat him off.

Twisting my freed gun-hand up, I drilled Elwood neatly through the chest, and let him slide down me to the floor.

The Negro had Pat against the wall, bothering him a lot. His broad red

back was an excellent target.

But I had used five of the six bullets in my gun. I had more in my pocket, but reloading takes time.

I stepped out of Elwood's feeble hands, and went to work with the flat of my gun on the Negro. There was a roll of fat where his skull and neck fit together. The third time I hit it, he flopped, taking Pat with him.

I rolled him off. The blond police detective — not very blond now — got up.

At the other end of the passageway, an open door showed an empty kitchen.

Pat and I went to the door that Elwood had been playing with. It was a solid piece of carpentering, and neatly fastened.

Yoking ourselves together, we began to beat the door with our combined three hundred and seventy or eighty pounds.

It shook, but held. We hit it again. Wood we couldn't see tore.

Again.

The door popped away from us. We went through — down a flight of steps — rolling, snowballing down — until a cement floor stopped us.

Pat came back to life first.

"You're a hell of an acrobat," he said. "Get off my neck!"

I stood up. He stood up. We seemed to be dividing the evening between falling on the floor and getting up from the floor.

A light-switch was at my shoulder. I turned it on.

If I looked anything like Pat, we were a fine pair of nightmares. He was all raw meat and dirt, with not enough clothes left to hide much of either.

I didn't like his looks, so I looked around the basement in which we stood. To the rear was a furnace, coal-bins and a woodpile. To the front was a hallway and rooms, after the manner of the upstairs.

The first door we tried was locked, but not strongly. We smashed through it into a photographer's dark-room.

The second door was unlocked, and put us in a chemical laboratory: retorts, tubes, burners and a small still. There was a little round iron stove in the middle of the room. No one was there.

We went out into the hallway and to the third door, not so cheerfully. This cellar looked like a bloomer. We were wasting our time here, when we should have stayed upstairs. I tried the door.

It was firm beyond trembling.

We smacked it with our weight, together, experimentally. It didn't shake.

"Wait."

Pat went to the woodpile in the rear and came back with an axe.

He swung the axe against the door, flaking out a hunk of wood. Silvery points of light sparkled in the hole. The other side of the door was an iron or steel plate.

Pat put the axe down and leaned on the helve.

"You write the next prescription," he said.

I didn't have anything to suggest, except:

"I'll camp here. You beat it upstairs, and see if any of your coppers have shown up. This is a God-forsaken hole, but somebody may have sent in an alarm. See if you can find another way into this room — a window, maybe — or man-power enough to get us in through this door."

Pat turned toward the steps.

A sound stopped him — the clicking of bolts on the other side of the iron-lined door.

A jump put Pat on one side of the frame. A step put me on the other.

Slowly the door moved in. Too slowly.

I kicked it open.

Pat and I went into the room on top of my kick.

His shoulder hit the woman. I managed to catch her before she fell.

Pat took her gun. I steadied her back on her feet.

Her face was a pale blank square.

She was Myra Banbrock, but she now had none of the masculinity that had been in her photographs and description.

Steadying her with one arm — which also served to block her arms — I looked around the room.

A small cube of a room whose walls were brown-painted metal. On the floor lay a queer little dead man.

A little man in tight-fitting black velvet and silk. Black velvet blouse and breeches, black silk stockings and skull cap, black patent leather pumps. His face was small and old and bony, but smooth as stone, without line or wrinkle.

A hole was in his blouse, where it fit high under his chin. The hole bled very slowly. The floor around him showed it had been bleeding faster a little while ago.

Beyond him, a safe was open. Papers were on the floor in front of it, as if the safe had been tilted to spill them out.

The girl moved against my arm.

"You killed him?" I asked.

"Yes," too faint to have been heard a yard away.

"Why?"

She shook her short brown hair out of her eyes with a tired jerk of her head.

"Does it make any difference?" she asked. "I did kill him."

"It might make a difference," I told her, taking my arm away, and going over to shut the door. People talk more freely in a room with a closed door. "I happen to be in your father's employ. Mr. Reddy is a police detective. Of course, neither of us can smash any laws, but if you'll tell us what's what, maybe we can help you."

"My father's employ?" she questioned.

"Yes. When you and your sister disappeared, he engaged me to find you. We found your sister, and —"

Life came into her face and eyes and voice.

"I didn't kill Ruth!" she cried. "The papers lied! I didn't kill her! I didn't know she had the revolver. I

didn't know it! We were going away to hide from — from everything. We stopped in the woods to burn the — those things. That's the first time I knew she had the revolver. We had talked about suicide at first, but I had persuaded her — thought I had persuaded her — not to. I tried to take the revolver away from her, but I couldn't. She shot herself while I was trying to get it away. I tried to stop her. I didn't kill her!"

This was getting somewhere.

"And then?" I encouraged her.

"And then I went to Sacramento and left the car there, and came back to San Francisco. Ruth told me she had written Raymond Elwood a letter. She told me that before I persuaded her not to kill herself — the first time. I tried to get the letter from Raymond. She had written him she was going to kill herself. I tried to get the letter, but Raymond said he had given it to Hador.

"So I came here this evening to get it. I had just found it when there was a lot of noise upstairs. Then Hador came in and found me. He bolted the door. And — and I shot him with the revolver that was in the safe. I — I shot him when he turned around, before he could say anything. It had to be that way, or I couldn't."

"You mean you shot him without being threatened or attacked by him?" Pat asked.

"Yes. I was afraid of him, afraid to let him speak. I hated him! I couldn't help it. It had to be that way. If he had talked I couldn't have shot him. He — he wouldn't have let me!"

"Who was this Hador?" I asked.

She looked away from Pat and me, at the walls, at the ceiling, at the queer little dead man on the floor.

"He was a ——" She cleared her throat, and started again, staring down at her feet. "Raymond Elwood brought us here the first time. We thought it was funny. But Hador was a devil. He told you things and you believed them. You couldn't help it. He told you *everything* and you believed it. Perhaps we were drugged. There was always a warm bluish wine. It must have been drugged. We couldn't have done those things if it hadn't. Nobody would — He called himself a priest — a priest of Alzoa. He taught a freeing of the spirit from the flesh by —"

Her voice broke huskily. She shuddered.

"It was horrible!" she went on presently in the silence Pat and I had left for her. "But you believed him. That is the whole thing. You can't understand it unless you understand that. The things he taught could not be so. But he said they were, and you *believed* they were. Or maybe — I don't know — maybe you pretended you believed them, because you were crazy and drugs were in your blood. We came back again and again, for weeks, months, before the disgust that had to come drove us away.

"We stopped coming, Ruth and I — and Irma. And then we found out what he was. He demanded money, more money than we had been paying

while we believed — or pretended belief — in his cult. We couldn't give him the money he demanded. I told him we wouldn't. He sent us photographs — of us — taken during the — the times here. They were — *pictures — you — couldn't — explain.* And they were true! We knew them true! What could we do? He said he would send copies to our father, every friend, everyone we knew — unless we paid.

"What could we do — except pay? We got the money somehow. We gave him money — more — more — more. And then we had no more — could get no more. We didn't know what to do! There was nothing to do, except — Ruth and Irma wanted to kill themselves. I thought of that, too. But I persuaded Ruth not to. I said we'd go away. I'd take her away — keep her safe. And then — then — this!"

She stopped talking, went on staring at her feet.

I looked again at the little dead man on the floor, weird in his black cap and clothes. No more blood came from his throat.

It wasn't hard to put the pieces together. This dead Hador, self-ordained priest of something or other, staging orgies under the alias of religious ceremonies. Elwood, his confederate, bringing women of family and wealth to him. A room lighted for photography, with a concealed camera. Contributions from his converts so long as they were faithful to the cult. Blackmail — with the help of the photographs — afterward.

I looked from Hador to Pat Reddy. He was scowling at the dead man. No sound came from outside the room.

"You have the letter your sister wrote Elwood?" I asked the girl.

Her hand flashed to her bosom, and crinkled paper there.

"Yes."

"It says plainly she meant to kill herself?"

"Yes."

"That ought to square her with Contra Costa county," I said to Pat.

He nodded his battered head.

"It ought to," he agreed. "It's not likely that they could prove murder on her even without that letter. With it, they'll not take her into court. That's a safe bet. Another is that she won't have any trouble over this shooting. She'll come out of court free, and thanked in the bargain."

Myra Banbrock flinched away from Pat as if he had hit her in the face.

I was her father's hired man just now. I saw her side of the affair.

I lit a cigarette and studied what I could see of Pat's face through blood and grime. Pat is a right guy.

"Listen, Pat," I wheedled him, though with a voice that was as if I were not trying to wheedle him at all. "Miss Banbrock can go into court and come out free and thanked, as you say. But to do it, she's got to use everything she knows. She's got to have all the evidence there is. She's got to use all those photographs Hador took — or all we can find of them.

"Some of those pictures have sent women to suicide, Pat — at least two

that we know. If Miss Banbrock goes into court, we've got to make the photographs of God knows how many other women public property. We've got to advertise things that will put Miss Banbrock — and you can't say how many other women and girls — in a position that at least two women have killed themselves to escape."

Pat scowled at me and rubbed his dirty chin with a dirtier thumb.

I took a deep breath and made my play.

"Pat, you and I came here to question Raymond Elwood, having traced him here. Maybe we suspected him of being tied up with the mob that knocked over the St. Louis bank last month. Maybe we suspected him of handling the stuff that was taken from the mail cars in that stick-up near Denver week before last. Anyway, we were after him, knowing that he had a lot of money that came from nowhere, and a real estate office that did no real estate business.

"We came here to question him in connection with one of these jobs I've mentioned. We were jumped by a couple of the Negroes upstairs when they found we were sleuths. The rest of it grew out of that. This religious cult business was just something we ran into, and didn't interest us especially. So far as we knew, all these folks jumped us just through friendship for the man we were trying to question. Hador was one of them, and, tussling with you, you shot him with his own gun, which, of course, is the one Miss Banbrock found in the safe."

Reddy didn't seem to like my suggestion at all. The eyes with which he regarded me were decidedly sour.

"You're goofy," he accused me. "What'll that get anybody? That won't keep Miss Banbrock out of it. She's here, isn't she, and the rest of it will come out like thread off a spool."

"But Miss Banbrock *wasn't* here," I explained. "Maybe the upstairs is full of coppers by now. Maybe not. Anyway, you're going to take Miss Banbrock out of here and turn her over to Dick Foley, who will take her home. She's got nothing to do with this party. Tomorrow she, and her father's lawyer, and I, will all go up to Martinez and make a deal with the prosecuting attorney of Contra Costa county. We'll show him how Ruth killed herself. If somebody happens to connect the Elwood who I hope is dead upstairs with the Elwood who knew the girls and Mrs. Correll, what of it? If we keep out of court — as we'll do by convincing the Contra Costa people they can't possibly convict her of her sister's murder — we'll keep out of the newspapers — and out of trouble."

Pat hung fire, thumb still to chin.

"Remember," I urged him, "it's not only Miss Banbrock we're doing this for. It's a couple of dead ones, and a flock of live ones, who certainly got mixed up with Hador of their own accords, but who don't stop being human beings on that account."

Pat shook his head stubbornly.

"I'm sorry," I told the girl with faked hopelessness. "I've done all I

can, but it's a lot to ask of Reddy. I don't know that I blame him for being afraid to take a chance on —"

Pat is Irish.

"Don't be so damned quick to fly off," he snapped at me, cutting short my hypocrisy. "But why do I have to be the one that shot this Hador? Why not you?"

I had him!

"Because," I explained, "you're a bull and I'm not. There'll be less chance of a slip-up if he was shot by a bona fide, star-wearing, flat-footed officer of the peace. I killed most of those birds upstairs. You ought to do something to show you were here."

That was only part of the truth. My idea was that if Pat took the credit, he couldn't very well ease himself out afterward, no matter what happened. Pat's a right guy, and I'd trust him anywhere — but you can trust a man just as easily if you have him sewed up.

Pat grumbled and shook his head, but:

"I'm ruining myself, I don't doubt," he growled, "but I'll do it, this once."

"Attaboy!" I went over to pick up the girl's hat from the corner in which it lay. "I'll wait here until you come back from turning her over to Dick." I gave the girl her hat and orders together. "You go to your home with the man Reddy turns you over to. Stay there until I come, which will be as soon as I can make it. Don't tell anybody anything, except that I told you to keep quiet. That includes your father. Tell him I told you not to tell him even where you saw me. Got it?"

"Yes, and I —"

Gratitude is nice to think about afterward, but it takes time when there's work to be done.

"Get going, Pat!"

They went.

As soon as I was alone with the dead man I stepped over him and knelt in front of the safe, pushing letters and papers away, hunting for photographs. None was in sight. One compartment of the safe was locked.

I frisked the corpse. No key. The locked compartment wasn't very strong, but neither am I the best safe-burglar in the West. It took me a while to get into it.

What I wanted was there. A thick sheaf of negatives. A stack of prints — half a hundred of them.

I started to run through them, hunting for the Banbrock girls' pictures. I wanted to have them pocketed before Pat came back. I didn't know how much farther he would let me go.

Luck was against me — and the time I had wasted getting into the compartment. He was back before I had got past the sixth print in the stack. Those six had been — pretty bad.

"Well, that's done," Pat growled at me as he came into the room. "Dick's got her. Elwood is dead, and so is the only one of the Negroes I saw upstairs. Everybody else seems to have beat it. No bulls have shown — so I put in a call for a wagonful."

I stood up, holding the negatives in one hand, the prints in the other.

"What's all that?" he asked.

I went after him again.

"Photographs. You've just done me a big favor, Pat, and I'm not hoggish enough to ask another. But I'm going to put something in front of you, Pat. I'll give you the lay, and you can name it.

"These" — I waved the pictures at him — "are Hador's meal-tickets — the photos he was either collecting on or planning to collect on. They're photographs of people, Pat, mostly women and girls, and some of them are pretty rotten.

"If tomorrow's papers say that a flock of photos were found in this house after the fireworks, there's going to be a fat suicide-list in the next day's papers, and a fatter list of disappearances. If the papers say nothing about the photos, the lists may be a little smaller, but not much. Some of the people whose pictures are here know they are here. They will expect the police to come hunting for them. We know this much about the photographs — two women have killed themselves to get away from them. This is an armful of stuff that can dynamite a lot of people, Pat, and a lot of families — no matter which of those two ways the papers read.

"But, suppose, Pat, the papers say that just before you shot Hador he succeeded in burning a lot of pictures and papers, burning them beyond recognition. Isn't it likely, then, that there won't be any suicides? That some of the disappearances of recent months may clear themselves up? There she is, Pat — you name it."

Looking back, it seems to me I had come a lot nearer being eloquent than ever before in my life.

But Pat didn't applaud.

He cursed me. He cursed me thoroughly, bitterly, and with an amount of feeling that told me I had won another point in my little game. He called me more things than I ever listened to before from a man who was built of meat and bone, and who therefore could be smacked.

When he was through, we carried the papers and photographs and a small book of addresses we found in the safe into the next room, and fed them to the little round iron stove there. The last of them was ash before we heard the police overhead.

"That's absolutely all!" Pat declared when we got up from our work. "Don't ever ask me to do anything else for you if you live to be a thousand."

"That's absolutely all," I echoed.

I like Pat. He is a right guy. The sixth photograph in the stack had been of his wife — the coffee importer's reckless, hot-eyed daughter.

THE COMPLEAT CRIMINAL

'Way back in our issue of November 1945 we brought you the first pair of adventures of Karmesin, that powerful personality who is either the greatest criminal of our time or the most consummate liar in modern fiction. We had planned to schedule the remaining six exploits close on the heels of the first two, but always something intervened — space limitations, production difficulties, or date deadlines on other stories. Now we realize with amazement that two full years have passed — much too long a period to keep Karmesin in a state of inarticulate hibernation. On the other hand, two years is also too long a time in which to expect even the most faithful readers of EQMM to remember on how grand a scale Karmesin is "The Compleat Criminal." So we shall do something we rarely succumb to in our editorial chitchat: repeat ourselves.

To begin with, let us remind you that a crook, by instinct and by the laws of lawlessness, is invariably a specialist. The jewel thief, for example, makes no attempt to sell gold bricks: he leaves that species of knavery to his fellow specialist, the confidence man. Bank robbers, counterfeiters, blackmailers — all the rogues, riffraff and royalty alike — usually stick to their last. That is why, when we think of Arsène Lupin or Raffles as crooks, we think of them primarily as thieves; when we recall the hunchbacked figure of Flavio Minetti, we visualize him as an inveterate and premeditating murderer; when we nostalgically go back in our memory to the grandiose Get-Rich-Quick Wallingford, we remember only the master con man and business buccaneer. The picture is altogether different, however, when we think of Karmesin. Despite his air of shattered magnificence Karmesin is a one-man Rogue's Gallery — a specialist in crime only in the sense that he specializes in all types and varieties.

In the first two adventures recorded in EQMM, Karmesin proved himself an expert murderer and an accomplished jewel thief. Now we give you "Karmesin, Swindler" and "Karmesin, Criminal Lawyer." And in future issues Karmesin will demonstrate his prowess as a bank robber, a confidence man, a racketeer, and a blackmailer. You can almost name the crime and Karmesin will show you how it's done — with finesse, if not with success. The fraudulent fables of the genial old man with the Nietzschean mustache, which lies under his immense nose like a sleeping squirrel, have an old-world charm, sharpened by the bite of irony. You simply can't help liking this sinful old Munchausen. Indeed, you feel that if you must be swindled, you would rather have Karmesin do it than anyone else; and after he steals your wallet, you have the irresistible impulse to say to this Falstaffian felon: "I'm sorry, old man, that there's not more in it."

THE ADVENTURES OF KARMESIN

by GERALD KERSH

3. KARMESIN, SWINDLER

Bop! went my gas ring and extinguished itself. In combinations of six adjectives and three nouns I blasted and I damned the bodies and the souls of the Gas Companies. Karmesin was at this moment sitting at my table. He had in front of him a tin tobacco box, full of cigarette ends; with his usual deliberation he quietly extracted the tobacco which he put into a saucer and threw the torn papers back into the box. He could probably see in the dark. The failure of the gas did not disturb him. As I paused for breath I heard the faint crackling of the tiny pieces of paper and dried tobacco, and the ponderous deliberate voice of Karmesin demanding in an elephantine mutter:

"What seems to be upsetting you?"

"The gas," I said, "I haven't got another penny."

"Yes," said Karmesin, "It is irritating how little gas one gets for one's penny. Nevertheless, my young friend, you must learn to be philosophical. Light a candle."

"And how the devil," I said, "can I cook an egg with a candle?"

"Eat it raw," said Karmesin; and crackle, crackle, went another cigarette. "Have you got any cigarette papers?"

"No."

"*Chort vosmi!*" bellowed Karmesin.

"Chew it," I said maliciously, pointing to the tobacco.

"All right," said Karmesin. "Do not imagine that it is so easy to defeat a man like me. When you are my age, my young friend, you will learn a little philosophy. Calm, balance, and a faculty for objective reasoning — these things are necessary in this life."

. . . I have mentioned Karmesin: that powerful personality, that immense old man with his air of shattered magnificence. I wish you could have met him — Karmesin, with his looming chest and unfathomable abdomen, still excellently dressed in a suit of sound blue serge; with the strong, cropped skull and the massive purple face; the tattered white eyebrows and the heavy yellowish eyes as large as plums; the vast Nietzsche mustache, light brown with tobacco smoke, which lay beneath his nose like a hibernating squirrel, concealing his mouth and stirring like a living thing as he breathed upon it — Karmesin the greatest criminal or the greatest

liar of his time . . .

"Listen," I said, "Suppose one cut a piece of cardboard the size of a penny —"

"No," said Karmesin. "It would be a waste of time. I know a man who tried that once. Not merely did it fail to work, but it also jammed the mechanism of the gas meter; and he had to confess to his landlord. To failure was added humiliation. He was a young man like you."

"Was that one of *your* great fiascos?"

"My friend," said Karmesin, "I do not indulge in fiascos. I have a creative mind, a grasp of facts, and an almost incredible foresight. When I swindle a Gas Company, it is not for pennies but for thousands of pounds."

"Thousands of pounds?" I asked.

"Well, francs, anyway."

"Do you mean to say you have actually got money out of a Gas Company?"

"It was simple," said Karmesin. "But then, all truly great crimes are simple. One may always rely upon the ordinary man's inability to see the obvious. What is a genius? A man with a firm grasp of the obvious, plus a creative touch. Thus, in the winter of 19 —, when I found myself ill and temporarily short of money in Paris, I discovered a means whereby I could obtain free heating and light, and furthermore get heavily paid for doing so. In cash! 10,000 francs. That put me on my feet. It was with the capital that I obtained from the Gas Company that I was able to go to Brazil and perpetrate perhaps one of the most artistic diamond robberies of all time."

Karmesin is, as I have said, quite supreme; if not as a criminal, then as a story-teller. It is quite easy to associate that immense, genial, aged, and philosophical man of mystery with almost any kind of lawlessness. He has a way with him. You tend to believe every word that finds its way through his cigarette-stained Neitzsche mustache. But how could such a man stoop to crime? Or, on the other hand, to lying?

"I never know when to believe you," I said.

"My dear sir," said Karmesin, "I comfort myself with the memory of this incident whenever the gas fails.

"This is how it was. I found myself in Paris. In all businesses one has one's ups and downs. This was a barren period. It had been necessary for me, on account of certain unforeseen circumstances, to leave Geneva in a great hurry, and to travel in a third-class carriage across France. French third-class carriages even in these times are bad enough, but before the War they were worse. It is scarcely extraordinary, therefore, that I contracted a severe attack of influenza which stretched me on my back in my little room, off the Boulevard Ornano.

"I may say that I carried French papers in the name of Charles Lavoisier. I spoke French like a Parisian. That is nothing. I speak eleven languages like a native, even Finnish.

"You must imagine me therefore

lying upon my bed in this abominable little room in the atrocious cold of one of the severest winters on record. My rent was paid for a quarter in advance and I had a certain amount of credit with the local tradesmen, but all my portable property was gone. I had no money and the room was very cold. This is the quality of Parisian blankets: they are of some diaphanous substance lightly sprinkled with fluff; when you cover yourself with them all the fluff flies into your nostrils leaving nothing but a sort of woven basis so thin that no bug dares to set foot on them for fear of falling through and breaking his legs. Even in the midst of my fever my brain began to work. Picture to yourself one unquenchable spark of genius fighting single-handed against the fogs and vapors of influenza — that was the brain of Karmesin! Outside, the snow came down, melted, and turned to ice. There were nights of appalling frost —"

"Well," I said, "what about the Gas Company?"

"I'm just coming to that. Even in the midst of my fever I had an inspiration. I thought it out overnight and in the morning my gas lights were burning, my gas radiator was glowing, and I had stopped shivering; and yet I had achieved this *without putting a single coin in the meter and without tampering with its mechanism.*"

"How did you manage that?"

"Wait! A fortnight passed. The man from the Gas Company came to empty the meter.

"He read the little dials, saw that so many cubic feet had been consumed, opened the meter, and found it empty. He was a French official with an absurd beard.

"He said: 'M'sieur, your meter is empty.'

"I said: 'M'sieur the collector, that is nothing to me.'

"He said: 'But where is the money?'

"I replied: 'Monsieur, I am a sick man. I cannot sit here and answer your riddles. Have the goodness to go.'

"He said: 'Monsieur, this will have to be reported.'

"I said: 'Report to the devil.' He replaced the padlock and sealed it. All the same, I had gas for the next fortnight. Then the collector came again with another official. First of all they examined the seal on the padlock and found it intact; it was one of those complicated lead seals that cannot easily be tampered with. Then they looked at the glaring lights and the red hot stove. Then the inspector gave me one of those looks with which lesser men than myself are so easily terrified, opened the box — and found nothing.

"You could have heard the argument as far away as the Place D'Anvers.

"Result? They decided that my meter was faulty, took it away, and replaced it with a new one. A devil of a meter, as large and as red as an omnibus, with a mechanism that made a noise like a lady in a car shifting gears.

"A week later they came again,

again found all the gas lights burning and a room like an oven. It took them about three-quarters of an hour to open the meter, they had locked it up so tight. And what did they find? Empty space!" roared Karmesin, with a shout of laughter that made the water jug dance in its basin and the window panes vibrate.

"But Karmesin," I asked, "How did you manage it?"

"Wait," said Karmesin. "That is exactly what the gas people asked me. I simply smiled a mysterious smile and said nothing. And then one day, as I expected, I was politely invited to have an interview with one of the directors of the company, and he said something to this effect:

" 'Monsieur Lavoisier, I don't know what you're up to but it certainly can't be legal. What tricks have you been playing with our meter?'

"I merely smiled. 'Come, Monsieur,' said this gas man, 'we wish to be lenient. We do not wish to prosecute. Tell us exactly how you cause these meters to function without putting any money in and we will let the matter rest — we might even forget about the small item of gas you have consumed without paying for it!'

"I said: 'If I tell you, Monsieur, you will not only refrain from prosecuting but you will also pay me 20,000 francs. If you do not do this then I shall discreetly make public a perfectly simple method whereby the consumers of your gas can get it free of charge. In the end it would be worth more than 20,000 to you.'

" 'This is preposterous!' he shouted.

" 'You would have to change all your meters,' I insinuated.

"We compromised at 10,000 francs and he went with me to my room."

"Well?" I asked.

"The whole thing was so simple. I pointed to the bottom of the meter and showed him a tiny hole, no larger than a pinhole. That was Number One. Then I showed him my cake of soap — Apparatus No. Two. 'Well?' asked the gas director. I took him to the window and opened it. Lying on the window sill were three other cakes of soap. In each cake was an indentation the exact size of a silver franc.

"It was so *childishly* simple. Into my little soap moulds I had poured water; the night frost turned the water to ice; the one-franc piece of ice was just hard enough to operate the mechanism of the meter; the gas thus obtained heated the room; the heat turned the ice back to water which dripped out of the little pinhole. Result? Invisibility!"

"That's extraordinarily clever," I said. "And did you get your 10,000 francs?"

"Yes," said Karmesin. "But what the devil was 10,000 francs? £500? £500! Chicken feed!"

Karmesin rolled some of his twice-used cigarette tobacco into a kind of mahorka-cigarette, in a bit of newspaper, and fumigated his gigantic mustache with a puff of frightfully acrid smoke.

4. KARMESIN, CRIMINAL LAWYER

KARMESIN nudged me and said: "Look at this."

I looked. A young man was walking towards us — a handsome young man, dressed like an actor in a tight gray suit, a silk tie that made my mouth water, a hat that must have cost three guineas, and a magnificent pair of crocodile-skin shoes. As he passed I caught a whiff of violet-scented brilliantine.

"*Ekh!*" said Karmesin, "Barbarians! Is there any animal more absurd than man? No. Observe that youth. *Pfui!* He encases himself in the wool of a sheep; knots about his neck the guts of a worm; has a reptile flayed to cover his feet; skins a rabbit to put on his head; and smears his hair with the fat of dead bullocks impregnated with the juices of squashed plants. Can you imagine an ape being so stupid as to want to cover itself in the skin of a débutante, and wear round its neck a string of beads composed of the teeth of a politician? Only among men is it considered a symbol of virtue to hang oneself with such dead animal matter — silks, feathers, bits of stone! *Tcha!* Yet for these things nearly all crimes are committed. Only man is vain."

I could not refrain from saying: "All the same, I watched you the other day trying to take the shine off the seat of your trousers by scraping it with a razor blade, and you raised blue murder when you cut the cloth."

Karmesin gave me a frightful look and said: "You better be careful! Nature has placed an enemy in your mouth, to steal your brains away. If I attach some importance to dress, it is because I know that the world is full of fools who worship that importance. I use clothes; I am not their slave. Yet the desire for clothes, when it gets hold of a man, may be as destructive as drunkenness, drugs, or the woman-fever. I knew a man who used to starve himself in order to buy expensive neckties. Having bought one, he would put it on, and then stood in an elegant attitude outside the *Café Anglais*, ostentatiously picking his teeth. Indeed, one of my very earliest essays in crime was inspired by the clothes-fever of a bank clerk."

"Were you very young then?"

"No, not very young. If I were writing a textbook of crime, a Guide to Easy Money, I should say: *If you wish to become a successful criminal, never start too young. Lay your plans. See much of life and men. Observe human behavior. Work alone. Choose, first of all, a fool-proof scheme; then start, coolly and cautiously, as one starts any other commercial enterprise.* Of course, I am an exception. I am a creative genius. I first conceive a crime story, then make it come true. Besides, I started with one great advantage: I was a lawyer."

"Were you?"

"Yes, fully qualified, and even with something of a practice. If I were running a training school for criminals,

I should article all my pupils to solicitors. Nobody has less respect for the law than a solicitor. He has uncovered its nakedness: he has peeped under the sombre robes and observed the corsets, trusses, superfluities, hollownesses, and blemishes on the body of Justice. I was practicing in Paris and doing tolerably well. I was, as you may imagine, a very shrewd young man: clear-sighted, clear-headed, full of common-sense, subtle, quick to seize opportunities — a perfect young attorney.

"I was, also, extraordinarily well-dressed. Clothes never made any impression upon me, but I knew their effect upon the world in general. So then, as always, I spent a great deal on dress. I got my coats in London — the great Fisher made my waistcoats, which were the envy of all Paris; Schall, who was a greater hatter than Gibus, made hats for me; and old Mathurin created cravats for me which caused men to say: 'They are not cravats: they are poems!' My mustache, moreover, was superlative; you see now only the ghost of what it used to be" — Karmesin stroked the thirteen-odd inches of dense white hair on his upper lip — "A mustache such as one turned in the street to admire. I used to perfume it with *Fougere Royale.* Aha, what a man I was then! The brain of a genius animating the body of a Hercules, turned out like D'Orsay! Needless to say, the upkeep of such a body was an expensive business."

"But you have just said you had an excellent practice?"

"Ye-es, yes, but not as good as all that. I never could live on a small scale. It was an expensive business, I say. Besides, dressing as I did, could I live on a top floor in Montmartre? Ask yourself. No. I had a flat in the Avenue Victor Hugo. To cut it short, I found myself somewhat in debt . . .

"Well. It was my habit to eat at Hammerschlager's, which was a fashionable café. It was a species of Quaglino's: one ate and then listened to a kind of band — a gypsy orchestra composed of five Montparnasse tziganes. I went there every night. I was an honored guest. The *maître d'hôtel* called me by name, which is an honor. I always occupied the same corner table, from which point I studied humanity and watched the beau-monde absorbing food and wine. And I noticed one peculiar thing: at about nine o'clock every evening, when the café was at its busiest, a young man would come in.

"He was a tall, slender fellow, fairly well-made, sallow-skinned and dark-haired, with a long, silky mustache and large black eyes. He was dressed with extraordinary care, in a good frock-coat and trousers, and a gray waistcoat with little red spots, like the back of a plaice. His hair was curled. He carried a thin ebony cane with an ivory knob. You could see that this youth spent many hours before his mirror, touching his face, playing with his mustache, brushing his eyebrows, and even rehearsing the expression of dignity and reserve

which pulled down his eyelids and tightened his rather well-cut lips. He came into Hammerschlager's every night at nine, walked into the middle of the restaurant, looked into every face, turned, and slowly walked out again.

"I began to wonder why he did this. Was he looking for somebody? No, I was convinced that he was not. He always looked *at* everybody; but without scrutiny. It occurred to me that he looked at people in order to see whether they were looking at him. He was, then, simply one of those foolish young men who dress and walk about the city in order to be seen. I spoke to the waiter: 'Adolphe, does that young man ever dine here?' 'Very rarely, monsieur.' 'How rarely?' 'Well, perhaps once a month — yes, about the end of every month.' 'And what does he eat?' 'Oh, very little, monsieur; a sole, an omelette, and half a bottle of wine, perhaps — never more than that.'

"Then I realized that this young man was one of those pitiable impoverished dandies who leave the office at six, dine at a cookshop for ten sous, dress, curl up their mustaches, and then walk up and down the boulevards and in and out of fashionable cafés. (I once knew a man who did the same thing merely to display his whiskers, which were exactly like those of the Emperor Franz-Josef.)

"I waited. One night the young man passed close to me. His glance fell on my waistcoat; his eyes lit up. Just as he was passing, I touched his sleeve. 'Excuse me,' I said, 'but aren't you Monsieur le Baron de la Tour d'Azyr?' He blushed with delight and replied: 'No, monsieur, I am M. Frederic de Cassis.' 'Oh, a million apologies,' I said; and so we got into conversation . . ."

"Well?"

"Well," said Karmesin, "he was a bank clerk. He was eaten up with the desire for the life of a gentleman — clothes, tiepins, and some credit in a decent restaurant or two. He wanted to cut a dash, walk the boulevards, smoke good cigars, and strut like a peacock. This was his ideal. This was his ambition and his great yearning. He craved new clothes as a drunkard craves absinthe. He plunged into his one good suit with the ecstatic joy of a man dying of thirst plunging into water. He came of a good but impoverished family. To dress was, for him, more important than to eat.

"I drew him out. His little soft soul emerged from its shell like a winkle on the end of a pin. He calculated that, with the equivalent of a thousand pounds or so, he could leave the country and join some of his more elegant relations in America. He wanted to steal some money from the bank in which he worked, but he was afraid. He feared pursuit, disgrace, degradation; the soul-destroying barrage of the cross-examination, the horror of a prison sentence; the perpetual stigma of the criminal and — worst of all — the ultimate short haircut, big boots, and ill-fitting prison clothes.

"I laughed.

"*Here*, I thought, *I sit in Hammerschlager's Restaurant quietly eating an entrecote, and Fate deals me this handful of aces!* I said to him: 'My friend, you have the good fortune to be speaking to Karmesin, the greatest criminal attorney in Paris. You shall steal your thousand pounds from the bank. You shall go to America with it. You shall never be prosecuted.'

" 'But how is that possible?' he asked.

" 'My friend,' I said, 'come with me.' I took him to my flat and dazzled him with its magnificence. I showed him my bedroom. I opened my wardrobe and displayed seventeen coats, thirty-two pairs of trousers, and forty waistcoats; cravats of every shape, size and color; and enough linen to stock a shop. 'Have you faith in me?' I asked.

" 'Infinite faith!' he replied, fondling a black silk waistcoat as a devout man might fondle a rosary.

" 'Then come to me tomorrow,' I said.

"He came to see me on the following evening at seven o'clock. I showed him an envelope. It contained a ticket to America. Then I said to him: 'Go back to your bank. Steal eighty to a hundred thousand francs. Bring them here to me. Then you shall have twenty thousand and your passage to America, and I guarantee that there will never be any prosecution.'

" 'But how can you guarantee that?' he asked.

"I replied: 'You shall see. I guarantee it. That is enough. Do as I say, and you are safe.' I talked to him. He needed little persuasion — particularly when I unfolded to him certain details of my plan of campaign.

"Two days later he slunk into my flat at six in the evening, with a fat bundle of notes: eighty thousand francs. 'Your ship sails tomorrow,' I said to him, 'Here is twenty thousand francs and the ticket. Go.'

"He began to tremble. 'They will telegraph New York and arrest me when I land!' I said: 'They will not.' He left, half dead with terror, and that was the last I saw of him.

"Then it was necessary for me to move quickly, because I had my side of the bargain to keep. I went to see young de Cassis' family: a shabby-genteel stepfather and a brutal-looking old lady who was his mother. 'Frederic is in trouble,' I said. 'Who cares?' said Madame de Cassis. 'I can get him out of trouble,' I said. 'All the better,' said she, 'but don't ask me to put my hand in my pocket, because I shan't.' 'No, my dear lady,' I said, 'simply permit me to act on your behalf and his. It will not cost you a penny.' 'Well, in that case,' she said, 'proceed.' 'Very good,' I said, and went and saw the President of the bank.

" 'Monsieur,' I said, 'I have been approached by the family of M. Frederic de Cassis. He has committed an indiscretion . . . He has robbed your bank of about eighty thousand francs.'

"The old gentleman jumped as if I had stuck a pin into his calf. 'What? What? Robbed the bank? Me? Us?

Of eighty thousand? Eighty? Eh? Eh? *Saperlipote de saperlipopette de sacré bon Dieu de Dieu . . .*'

"I calmed him. I spoke reasonably to him. Why pursue this absurd young man with his vengeance. He was probably already in New York, or farther. Who knew? Who would benefit, since he had almost certainly gambled the money away and then fled?

" 'But eighty thousand francs?' he said.

"I said to him: 'Monsieur. The family of de Cassis are of noble Norman stock. They are very, very poor but their honor is as dear to them as life itself. I am empowered to act for them. They cannot repay the full eighty thousand francs. If they could they would but . . . they have raised every farthing they have in the world. Altogether, they have raised exactly twenty thousand francs, which they will be glad to pay back to the bank in full settlement. Take it! It is, at least, twenty-five centimes on the franc: better than a loss of a hundred percent. Take it and drop all ideas of prosecuting this misguided de Cassis! Or leave it and lose everything.'

"He argued for three-quarters of an hour on matters of ethics and principle. But I am a man of personality, force, and charm. I could have handled three such matters before breakfast. He took the twenty thousand in full settlement of the deficit. Hence, young de Cassis had twenty thousand francs and his freedom, and the bank had twenty thousand francs, and I had forty thousand. It was a fair and gentlemanly division, *chort vozmi*, and everybody was happy."

Karmesin laughed again.

"It sounds very risky to me," said I.

Karmesin nodded. "A little. But what would you have? At the very worst they could only have refused to accept twenty thousand. In that case I should have given them forty thousand and had only twenty for myself. But I knew the President,—and my reputation was formidable. I had confidence. I knew I should never fail."

"And what happened to Cassis?"

"Oh, him! I said to myself: 'Here is a fool; his clothes wore him — he did not wear his clothes!' Then, about thirty years later, I saw his photograph in an American magazine. Under the picture was a success story: he came to America quite penniless and in rags, and worked his way to the Presidency of a National Bank. He was wearing an ill-fitting black jacket and striped trousers of atrocious cut."

"And what did you do with your part of the money?"

"Oh, I forget. I think I paid my tailor and replenished my wardrobe," said Karmesin.

S.O.S.

by AGATHA CHRISTIE

"Ah!" said Mr. Dinsmead appreciatively.

He stepped back and surveyed the round table with approval. The firelight gleamed on the coarse white tablecloth, the knives and forks, and the other table appointments.

"Is — is everything ready?" asked Mrs. Dinsmead hesitatingly. She was a little faded woman, with a colorless face, meagre hair scraped back from her forehead, and a perpetually nervous manner.

"Everything's ready," said her husband with a kind of ferocious geniality.

He was a big man, with stooping shoulders, and a broad red face. He had little pig's eyes that twinkled under his bushy brows, and a big jowl devoid of hair.

"Lemonade?" suggested Mrs. Dinsmead, almost in a whisper.

Her husband shook his head.

"Tea. Much better in every way. Look at the weather, streaming and blowing. A nice cup of hot tea is what's needed for supper on an evening like this."

He winked facetiously, then fell to surveying the table again.

"A good dish of eggs, cold corned beef, and bread and cheese. That's my order for supper. So come along and get it ready, mother. Charlotte's in the kitchen waiting to give you a hand."

Mrs. Dinsmead rose, carefully winding up the ball of her knitting.

"She's grown a very good-looking girl," she murmured.

"Ah!" said Mr. Dinsmead. "The mortal image of her Ma! So go along with you, and don't let's waste any more time."

He strolled about the room humming to himself for a minute or two. Once he approached the window and looked out.

"Wild weather," he murmured to himself. "Not much likelihood of our having visitors tonight."

Then he too left the room.

About ten minutes later Mrs. Dinsmead entered bearing a dish of fried eggs. Her two daughters followed, bringing the rest of the provisions. Mr. Dinsmead and his son Johnnie brought up the rear. The former seated himself at the head of the table.

"And for what we are to receive, etcetera," he remarked humorously. "And blessings on the man who first thought of tinned foods. What would we do, I should like to know, miles from anywhere, if we hadn't a tin now and then to fall back upon when the butcher forgets his weekly call?"

He proceeded to carve corned beef dexterously.

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"I wonder who ever thought of building a house like this, miles from anywhere," said his daughter Magdalen pettishly. "We never see a soul."

"No," said her father. "Never a soul."

"I can't think what made you take it, father," said Charlotte.

"Can't you, my girl? Well, I had my reasons — I had my reasons."

His eyes sought his wife's furtively, but she frowned.

"And haunted too," said Charlotte. "I wouldn't sleep alone here for anything."

"Pack of nonsense," said her father. "Never seen anything, have you?"

"Not *seen* anything perhaps, but ——"

"But what?"

Charlotte did not reply, but she shivered a little. A great surge of rain came driving against the windowpane, and Mrs. Dinsmead dropped a spoon with a tinkle on the tray.

"Not nervous, are you, mother?" said Mr. Dinsmead. "It's a wild night, that's all. Don't you worry, we're safe here by our fireside, and not a soul from outside likely to disturb us. Why, it would be a miracle if anyone did. And miracles don't happen. No," he added as though to himself, with a kind of peculiar satisfaction. "Miracles don't happen."

As the words left his lips there came a sudden knocking at the door. Mr. Dinsmead stayed as though petrified.

"What's that?" he muttered. His jaw fell.

Mrs. Dinsmead gave a little whimpering cry and pulled her shawl up round her. The color came into Magdalen's face and she leaned forward and spoke to her father.

"The miracle has happened," she said. "You'd better go and let whoever it is in."

Twenty minutes earlier Mortimer Cleveland had stood in the driving rain and mist surveying his car. It was really cursed bad luck. Two punctures within ten minutes of each other, and here he was, stranded, miles from anywhere, in the midst of these bare Wiltshire downs with night coming on and no prospect of shelter. Serve him right for trying to take a short-cut. If only he had stuck to the main road! Now he was lost on what seemed a mere cart-track on the hillside, with no possibility of getting the car farther, and with no idea if there were even a village anywhere near.

He looked round him perplexedly, and his eye was caught by a gleam of light on the hillside above him. A second later the mist obscured it once more, but waiting patiently, he presently got a second glimpse of it. After a moment's cogitation, he left the car and struck up the side of the hill.

Soon he was out of the mist, and he recognized the light as shining from the lighted window of a small cottage. Here, at any rate, was shelter. Mortimer Cleveland quickened his pace, bending his head to meet the furious onslaught of wind and rain trying its best to drive him back.

Cleveland was in his own way something of a celebrity though doubtless the majority of folks would have displayed complete ignorance of his name and achievements. He was an authority on mental science and had written two excellent text books on the subconscious. He was also a member of the Psychical Research Society and a student of the occult in so far as it affected his own conclusions and line of research.

He was by nature peculiarly susceptible to atmosphere, and by deliberate training he had increased his own natural gift. When he had at last reached the cottage and rapped at the door, he was conscious of an excitement, a quickening of interest, as though all his faculties had suddenly been sharpened.

The murmur of voices within had been plainly audible to him. Upon his knock there came a sudden silence, then the sound of a chair being pushed back along the floor. In another minute the door was flung open by a boy of about fifteen. Cleveland could look straight over his shoulder upon the scene within.

It reminded him of an interior by some Dutch Master. A round table spread for a meal, a family party sitting round it, one or two flickering candles and the firelight's glow over all. The father, a big man, sat one side of the table, a little gray woman with a frightened face sat opposite him. Facing the door, looking straight at Cleveland, was a girl. Her startled eyes looked straight into his, her hand with a cup in it was arrested halfway to her lips.

She was, Cleveland saw at once, a beautiful girl of an extremely uncommon type. Her hair, red gold, stood out round her face like a mist; her eyes, very far apart, were a pure gray. She had the mouth and chin of an early Italian Madonna.

There was a moment's dead silence. Then Cleveland stepped into the room and explained his predicament. He brought his trite story to a close, and there was another pause harder to understand. At last, as though with an effort, the father rose.

"Come in, sir — Mr. Cleveland, did you say?"

"That is my name," said Mortimer, smiling.

"Ah! yes. Come in, Mr. Cleveland. Not weather for a dog outside, is it? Come in by the fire. Shut the door, can't you, Johnnie? Don't stand there half the night."

Cleveland came forward and sat on a wooden stool by the fire. The boy Johnnie shut the door.

"Dinsmead, that's my name," said the other man. He was all geniality now. "This is the Missus, and these are my two daughters, Charlotte and Magdalen."

For the first time, Cleveland saw the face of the girl who had been sitting with her back to him, and saw that, in a totally different way, she was quite as beautiful as her sister. Very dark, with a face of marble pallor, a delicate aquiline nose, and a grave mouth. It was a kind of frozen

beauty, austere and almost forbidding. She acknowledged her father's introduction by bending her head, and she looked at him with an intent gaze that was searching in character. It was as though she were summing him up, weighing him in the balance of her clear young judgement.

"A drop of something to drink, eh, Mr. Cleveland?"

"Thank you," said Mortimer. "A cup of tea will meet the case admirably."

Mr. Dinsmead hesitated a minute, then he picked up the five cups, one after another, from the table and emptied them into the slop bowl.

"This tea's cold," he said brusquely. "Make us some more, will you, Mother?"

Mrs. Dinsmead got up quickly and hurried off with the teapot. Mortimer had an idea that she was glad to get out of the room.

The fresh tea soon came, and the unexpected guest was plied with viands.

Mr. Dinsmead talked and talked. He was expansive, genial, loquacious. He told the stranger all about himself. He'd lately retired from the building trade — yes, made quite a good thing out of it. He and the Missus thought they'd like a bit of country air — never lived in the country before. Wrong time of year to choose, of course, October and November, but they didn't want to wait. "Life's uncertain, you know, sir." So they had taken this cottage. Eight miles from anywhere, and nineteen miles from anything you could call a town. No, they didn't complain. The girls found it a bit dull, but he and mother enjoyed the quiet.

So he talked on, leaving Mortimer almost hypnotized by the easy flow. Nothing here, surely, but rather commonplace domesticity. And yet, at that first glimpse of the interior, he had diagnosed something else, some tension, some strain, emanating from one of those four people — he didn't know which. Mere foolishness, his nerves were all awry! They were startled by his sudden appearance — that was all.

He broached the question of a night's lodging, and was met with a ready response.

"You'll have to stop with us, Mr. Cleveland. Nothing else for miles round. We can give you a bedroom, and though my pajamas may be a bit roomy, why, they're better than nothing, and your own clothes will be dry by morning."

"It's very good of you."

"Not at all," said the other genially. "As I said just now, one couldn't turn away a dog on a night like this. Magdalen, Charlotte, go up and see to the room."

The two girls left the room. Presently Mortimer heard them moving about overhead.

"I can quite understand that two attractive young ladies like your daughters might find it dull here," said Cleveland.

"Good lookers, aren't they?" said Mr. Dinsmead with fatherly pride.

"Not much like their mother or myself. We're a homely pair, but much attached to each other, I'll tell you that, Mr. Cleveland. Eh, Maggie, isn't that so?"

Mrs. Dinsmead smiled primly. She had started knitting again. The needles clicked busily. She was a fast knitter.

Presently the room was announced ready, and Mortimer, expressing thanks once more, declared his intention of turning in.

"Did you put a hot-water bottle in the bed?" demanded Mrs. Dinsmead, suddenly mindful of her house pride.

"Yes, Mother, two."

"That's right," said Dinsmead. "Go up with him, girls, and see that everything is all right."

Magdalen preceded him up the staircase, her candle held aloft. Charlotte came behind.

The room was quite a pleasant one, small and with a sloping roof, but the bed looked comfortable, and the few pieces of somewhat dusty furniture were of old mahogany. A large can of hot water stood in the basin, a pair of pink pajamas of ample proportions were laid over a chair, and the bed was made and turned down.

Magdalen went over to the window and saw that the fastenings were secure. Charlotte cast a final eye over the washstand appointments. Then they both lingered by the door.

"Good night, Mr. Cleveland. You are sure there is everything?"

"Yes, thank you, Miss Magdalen. I am sorry to have given you both so much trouble. Good night."

"Good night."

They went out, shutting the door behind them. Mortimer Cleveland was alone. He undressed slowly and thoughtfully. When he had donned Mr. Dinsmead's pink pajamas, he gathered up his own wet clothes and put them outside the door as his host had bade him. From downstairs he could hear the rumble of Dinsmead's voice.

What a talker the man was! Altogether an odd personality — but indeed there was something odd about the whole family, or was it his imagination?

He went slowly back into his room and shut the door. He stood by the bed lost in thought. And then he started ——

The mahogany table by the bed was smothered in dust. Written in the dust were three letters, clearly visible. *S.O.S.*

Mortimer stared as if he could hardly believe his eyes. It was a confirmation of all his vague surmises and forebodings. He was right, then. Something was wrong in this house.

S.O.S. A call for help. But whose finger had written it in the dust? Magdalen's or Charlotte's? They had both stood there, he remembered, for a moment or two, before going out of the room. Whose hand had secretly dropped to the table and traced out those three letters?

The faces of the two girls came up before him. Magdalen's, dark and

aloof, and Charlotte's, as he had seen it first, wide-eyed, startled, with an unfathomable something in her glance.

He went again to the door and opened it. The boom of Mr. Dinsmead's voice was no longer to be heard. The house was silent.

He thought to himself.

"I can do nothing tonight. Tomorrow — well, we shall see."

Cleveland woke early. He went down through the living-room, and out into the garden. The morning was fresh and beautiful after the rain. Someone else was up early, too. At the bottom of the garden Charlotte was leaning on the fence staring out over the Downs. His pulses quickened a little as he went down to join her. All along he had been secretly convinced that it was Charlotte who had written the message. As he came up to her, she turned and wished him "Good morning." Her eyes were direct and childlike, with no hint of a secret understanding in them.

"A very good morning," said Mortimer, smiling. "The weather this morning is a contrast to last night's."

"It is indeed."

Mortimer broke off a twig from a tree near by. With it he began idly to draw on the smooth, sandy patch at his feet. He traced an S, then an O, then an S, watching the girl narrowly as he did so. But again he could detect no gleam of comprehension.

"Do you know what these letters represent?" he said abruptly.

Charlotte frowned a little. "Aren't they what boats send out when they are in distress?" she asked.

Mortimer nodded. "Someone wrote that on the table by my bed last night," he said quietly. "I thought perhaps *you* might have done so."

She looked at him in wide-eyed astonishment.

"I? Oh, no."

He was wrong then. A sharp pang of disappointment shot through him. He had been so sure — so sure. It was not often that his intuitions led him astray.

"You are quite certain?" he persisted.

"Oh, yes."

They turned and went slowly together toward the house. Charlotte seemed preoccupied about something. She replied at random to the few observations he made. Suddenly she burst out in a low, hurried voice.

"It — it's odd your asking that about those letters, S.O.S. I didn't write them, of course, but — I so easily might have."

He stopped and looked at her, and she went on quickly: "It sounds silly, I know, but I have been so frightened, so dreadfully frightened, and when you came in last night, it seemed like an — an answer to something."

"What are you frightened of?" he asked quickly.

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I think — it's the house. Ever since we came here it has been growing and growing. Everyone seems different somehow. Father, Mother,

and Magdalen, they all seem different."

Mortimer did not speak at once, and before he could do so, Charlotte went on again.

"You know this house is supposed to be haunted?"

"What?" All his interest was quickened.

"Yes, a man murdered his wife in it, oh, some years ago now. We only found out about it after we got here. Father says ghosts are all nonsense, but I — don't know."

Mortimer was thinking rapidly.

"Tell me," he said in a businesslike tone, "was this murder committed in the room I had last night?"

"I don't know anything about that," said Charlotte.

"I wonder now," said Mortimer half to himself, "yes, that may be it."

Charlotte looked at him uncomprehendingly.

"Miss Dinsmead," said Mortimer, gently, "have you ever had any reason to believe that you are mediumistic?"

She stared at him.

"I think you know that you *did* write S.O.S. last night," he said quietly. "Oh! quite unconsciously, of course. A crime stains the atmosphere, so to speak. A sensitive mind such as yours might be acted upon in such a manner. You have been reproducing the sensations and impressions of the victim. Many years ago *she* may have written S.O.S. on that table, and you unconsciously reproduced her act last night."

Charlotte's face brightened.

"I see," she said. "You think that is the explanation?"

A voice called her from the house, and she went in, leaving Mortimer to pace up and down the garden paths. Was he satisfied with his own explanation? Did it cover the facts as he knew them? Did it account for the tension he had felt on entering the house last night?

Perhaps, and yet he still had the odd feeling that his sudden appearance had produced something very like consternation. He thought to himself:

"I must not be carried away by the psychic explanation. It might account for Charlotte — but not for the others. My coming as I did upset them horribly, all except Johnnie. Whatever it is that's the matter, Johnnie is out of it."

He was quite sure of that; strange that he should be so positive, but there it was.

At that minute Johnnie himself came out of the cottage and approached the guest.

"Breakfast's ready," he said awkwardly. "Will you come in?"

Mortimer noticed that the lad's fingers were much stained. Johnnie felt his glance and laughed ruefully.

"I'm always messing about with chemicals, you know," he said. "It makes Dad awfully wild sometimes. He wants me to go into building, but I want to do chemistry and research work."

Mr. Dinsmead appeared at the window ahead of them, broad, jovial,

smiling, and at sight of him all Mortimer's distrust and antagonism reawakened. Mrs. Dinsmead was already seated at the table. She wished him "Good morning" in her colorless voice, and he had again the impression that for some reason or other, she was afraid of him.

Magdalen came in last. She gave him a brief nod and took her seat opposite him.

"Did you sleep well?" she asked abruptly. "Was your bed comfortable?"

She looked at him very earnestly, and when he replied courteously in the affirmative he noticed something very like a flicker of disappointment pass over her face. What had she expected him to say, he wondered?

He turned to his host.

"This lad of yours is interested in chemistry, it seems," he said pleasantly.

There was a crash. Mrs. Dinsmead had dropped her tea cup.

"Now then, Maggie, now then," said her husband.

It seemed to Mortimer that there was admonition, warning, in his voice. He turned to his guest and spoke fluently of the advantages of the building trade, and of not letting young boys get above themselves.

After breakfast he went out in the garden by himself, and smoked. The time was clearly at hand when he must leave the cottage. A night's shelter was one thing; to prolong it was difficult without an excuse, and what possible excuse could he offer? And yet he was singularly loath to depart.

Turning the thing over and over in his mind, he took a path that led round the other side of the house. His shoes were soled with crêpe rubber, and made little or no noise. He was passing the kitchen window when he heard Dinsmead's words from within, and the words attracted his attention immediately.

"It's a fair lump of money, it is."

Mrs. Dinsmead's voice answered. It was too faint in tone for Mortimer to hear the words, but Dinsmead replied:

"Nigh on £60,000, the lawyer said."

Mortimer had no intention of eavesdropping, but he retraced his steps very thoughtfully. The mention of money seemed to crystallize the situation. Somewhere or other there was a question of £60,000. It made the thing clearer — and uglier.

Magdalen came out of the house, but her father's voice called her almost immediately, and she went in again. Presently Dinsmead himself joined his guest.

"Rare good morning," he said genially. "I hope your car will be none the worse."

"Wants to find out when I'm going," thought Mortimer to himself.

Aloud he thanked Mr. Dinsmead once more for his timely hospitality.

"Not at all, not at all," said the other.

Magdalen and Charlotte came together out of the house and strolled arm in arm to a rustic seat some little distance away. The dark head and the golden one made a pleasant contrast

together and on an impulse Mortimer said:

"Your daughters are very unlike, Mr. Dinsmead."

The other who was just lighting his pipe gave a sharp jerk of the wrist and dropped the match.

"Do you think so?" he asked. "Yes, well, I suppose they are."

Mortimer had a flash of intuition.

"But of course they are not both your daughters," he said smoothly.

He saw Dinsmead look at him, hesitate for a moment, and then make up his mind.

"That's very clever of you, sir," he said. "No, one of them is a foundling, we took her in as a baby and we have brought her up as our own. She herself has not the least idea of the truth, but she'll have to know soon." He sighed.

"A question of inheritance?" suggested Mortimer quietly.

The other flashed a suspicious look at him.

Then he decided that frankness was best; his manner became almost aggresively frank and open.

"It's odd you should say that, sir."

"A case of telepathy, eh?" said Mortimer, and smiled.

"It is like this, sir. We took her in to oblige the mother — for a consideration, as at the time I was just starting in the building trade. A few months ago I noticed an advertisement in the papers, and it seemed to me that the child in question must be our Magdalen. I went to see the lawyers, and there has been a lot of talk one way and another. They were suspicious — naturally, as you might say — but everything is cleared up now. I am taking the girl herself to London next week — she doesn't know anything about it so far. Her father, it seems, was a very rich man. He only learned of the child's existence a few months before his death. He hired agents to try and trace her, and left all his money to her when she should be found."

Mortimer listened with close attention. He had no reason to doubt Mr. Dinsmead's story. It explained Magdalen's dark beauty; explained too, perhaps, her aloof manner. Nevertheless, though the story itself might be true, something lay undivulged behind it.

But Mortimer had no intention of rousing the other's suspicions. Instead, he must go out of his way to allay them.

"A very interesting story, Mr. Dinsmead," he said. "I congratulate Miss Magdalen. An heiress and a beauty, she has a great future ahead."

"She has that," agreed her father warmly, "and she's a rare good girl too, Mr. Cleveland."

There was every evidence of hearty warmth in his manner.

"Well," said Mortimer, "I must be pushing along now, I suppose. I have got to thank you once more, Mr. Dinsmead, for your singularly well-timed hospitality."

Accompanied by his host, he went into the house to bid farewell to Mrs. Dinsmead. She was standing by the window with her back to them, and

did not hear them enter. At her husband's jovial: "Here's Mr. Cleveland come to say good-bye," she started nervously and swung round, dropping something which she held in her hand. Mortimer picked it up for her. It was a miniature of Charlotte done in the style of some twenty-five years ago. Mortimer repeated to her the thanks he had already proffered to her husband. He noticed again her look of fear and the furtive glances that she shot at him beneath her eyelids.

The two girls were not in evidence, but it was not part of Mortimer's policy to seem anxious to see them; also he had his own idea, which was shortly to prove correct.

He had gone about half a mile from the house on his way down to where he had left the car the night before, when the bushes on one side of the path were thrust aside, and Magdalen came out on the track ahead of him.

"I had to see you," she said.

"I expected you," said Mortimer. "It was you who wrote S.O.S. on the table in my room last night, wasn't it?"

Magdalen nodded.

"Why?" asked Mortimer gently.

The girl turned aside and began pulling off leaves from a bush.

"I don't know," she said. "Honestly, I don't know."

"Tell me," said Mortimer.

Magdalen drew a deep breath.

"I am a practical person," she said, "not the kind of person who imagines things or fancies them. You, I think, believe in ghosts and spirits. I don't, and when I tell you that there is something very wrong in that house," she pointed up the hill, "I mean that there is something tangibly wrong — it's not just an echo of the past. It has been coming on ever since we've been there. Every day it grows worse. Father is different, Mother is different, Charlotte is different."

Mortimer interposed. "Is Johnnie different?" he asked.

Magdalen looked at him, a dawning appreciation in her eyes. "No," she said, "now I come to think of it, Johnnie is not different. He is the only one who's — who's untouched by it all. He was untouched last night at tea."

"And you?" asked Mortimer.

"I was afraid — horribly afraid, just like a child — without knowing what it was I was afraid of. And father was — queer, there's no other word for it. He talked about miracles and then I prayed — actually prayed for a miracle, and *you* knocked on the door."

She stopped abruptly, staring at him. "I seem mad to you, I suppose," she said defiantly.

"No," said Mortimer, "on the contrary you seem extremely sane. All sane people have a premonition of danger if it is near them."

"You don't understand," said Magdalen. "I was not afraid — for myself."

"For whom, then?"

But again Magdalen shook her head in a puzzled fashion. "I don't know."

She went on: "I wrote S.O.S. on an

impulse. I had an idea — absurd, no doubt — that they would not let me speak to you — the rest of them, I mean. I don't know what it was I meant to ask you to do. I don't know now."

"Never mind," said Mortimer. "I shall do it."

"What can you do?"

Mortimer smiled a little.

"I can think."

She looked at him doubtfully.

"Yes," said Mortimer, "a lot can be done that way, more than you would ever believe. Tell me, was there any chance word or phrase that attracted your attention just before that meal last evening?"

Magdalen frowned. "I don't think so," she said.

"At least I heard father saying something to mother about Charlotte being the living image of her, and he laughed in a very queer way, but — there's nothing odd in that, is there?"

"No," said Mortimer slowly, "except that Charlotte is not like your mother."

He remained lost in thought for a minute or two, then looked up to find Magdalen watching him uncertainly.

"Go home, child," he said, "and don't worry. Leave it in my hands."

She went obediently up the path towards the cottage. Mortimer strolled on a little farther, then threw himself down on the green turf. He closed his eyes, detached himself from conscious thought or effort, and let a series of pictures flit at will across the surface of his mind.

Johnnie! He always came back to Johnnie. Johnnie, completely innocent, utterly free from all the network of suspicion and intrigue, but nevertheless the pivot around which everything turned. He remembered the crash of Mrs. Dinsmead's cup on her saucer at breakfast that morning. What had caused her agitation? A chance reference on his part to the lad's fondness for chemicals? At the moment he had not been conscious of Mr. Dinsmead, but he saw him now clearly, as he sat, his teacup poised halfway to his lips.

That took him back to Charlotte, as he had seen her when the door opened last night. She had sat staring at him over the rim of her teacup. And swiftly on that followed another memory. Mr. Dinsmead emptying teacups one after the other, and saying, "This tea's cold."

He remembered the steam that went up. Surely the tea had not been so very cold after all?

Something began to stir in his brain. A memory of something read not so very long ago, within a month perhaps. Some account of a whole family poisoned by a lad's carelessness. A packet of arsenic left in the larder had sifted through to the bread below. He had read it in the paper. Probably Mr. Dinsmead had read it too.

Things began to grow clearer, . . .

Half an hour later, Mortimer Cleveland rose briskly to his feet.

It was evening once more in the

cottage. The eggs were poached tonight and there was a tin of brawn. Presently Mrs. Dinsmead came in from the kitchen bearing the big teapot. The family took their places round the table.

Mrs. Dinsmead filled the cups and handed them round the table. Then, as she put the teapot down, she gave a sudden little cry and pressed her hand to her heart. Mr. Dinsmead swung round in his chair, following the direction of her terrified eyes. Mortimer Cleveland was standing in the doorway.

He came forward. His manner was pleasant and apologetic.

"I'm afraid I startled you," he said. "I had to come back for something."

"Back for something," cried Mr. Dinsmead. His face was purple, his veins swelling. "Back for what, I should like to know?"

"Some tea," said Mortimer.

With a swift gesture he took something from his pocket and taking up one of the teacups from the table, emptied some of its contents into a little test-tube he held in his left hand.

"What — what are you doing?" gasped Mr. Dinsmead. His face had gone chalky-white, the purple dying out as if by magic. Mrs. Dinsmead gave a thin, high, frightened cry.

"You read the papers, Mr. Dinsmead? I am sure you do. Sometimes one reads accounts of a whole family being poisoned — some of them recover, some do not. In this case, *one would not.* The first explanation would be the tinned brawn you were eating, but supposing the doctor to be a suspicious man, not easily taken in by the tinned food theory? There is a packet of arsenic in your larder. On the shelf below it is a packet of tea. There is a convenient hole in the top shelf. What more natural to suppose than that the arsenic found its way into the tea by accident? Your son Johnnie might be blamed for carelessness, nothing more."

"I — I don't know what you mean," gasped Dinsmead.

"I think you do." Mortimer took up a second teacup and filled a second test-tube. He fixed a red label to one and a blue label to the other.

"The red-labeled one," he said, "contains tea from your daughter Charlotte's cup, the other from your daughter Magdalen's. I am prepared to swear that in the first I shall find four or five times the amount of arsenic than in the latter."

"You are mad!" said Dinsmead.

"Oh, dear me, no. I am nothing of the kind. You told me today, Mr. Dinsmead, that Magdalen was not your own daughter. You lied to me. Magdalen *is* your daughter. Charlotte was the child you adopted, the child who was so like her mother that when I held a miniature of that mother in my hand today I mistook it for one of Charlotte herself. You wanted your own daughter to inherit the fortune, and since it might be impossible to keep Charlotte out of sight, and someone who knew her mother might have realized the truth

of the resemblance, you decided on, well — sufficient white arsenic at the bottom of a teacup."

Mrs. Dinsmead gave a sudden high cackle, rocking herself to and fro in violent hysterics.

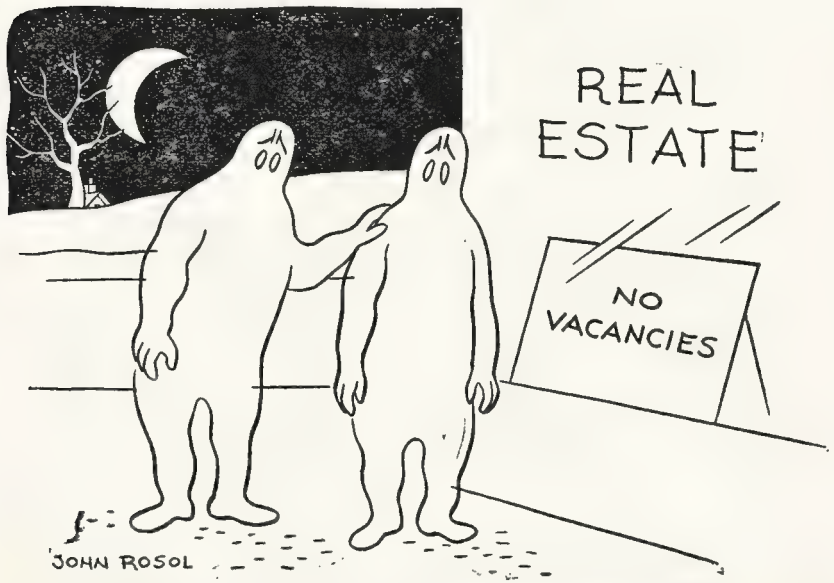
"Tea," she squeaked, "that's what he said, tea, not lemonade."

"Hold your tongue, can't you?" roared her husband wrathfully.

Mortimer saw Charlotte looking at him, wide-eyed, wondering, across the table. Then he felt a hand on his arm, and Magdalen dragged him out of earshot.

"Those," she pointed at the phials — "Daddy. You won't ——"

Mortimer laid his hand on her shoulder. "My child," he said, "you don't believe in the past. I do. I believe in the atmosphere of this house. If he had not come to this particular house, perhaps — I say *perhaps* — your father might not have conceived the plan he did. I will keep these two test-tubes to safeguard Charlotte now and in the future. Apart from that, I shall do nothing — in gratitude, if you will, to the hand that wrote S.O.S."



"Don't worry, there must be an empty house somewhere."

CrimInological Data

by JOHN L. COONEY

So you're a detective. Amateur or professional, it doesn't matter. But before you can honestly lay claim to such a title you should prove your right to it. After all, a man can't hang out a shingle and proclaim himself a physician. He must first take a rigid examination. Criminology is just as much an exact science as medicine. Below are listed ten more questions to test your claim.

If you answer the ten correctly, you will rank high in any gathering of criminologists. If you answer eight or nine correctly, you still are in the "superior" class. But if your score falls below five, you had better do a little brushing up on your police science.

The correct answers are on page 107.

1. The murder of Cain by his brother Abel is regarded as the first murder, but what is the first recorded murder mystery?
2. Can a scientist definitely establish that bloodstains are or are not from a specific person?
3. What is a "hearse man"?
4. *Portrait Parle* is a common term in police science. What does it mean?
5. In a well-established police force, what would be the difference between the duties of a graphologist and a handwriting expert?
6. Professional criminals generally file the serial numbers off their revolvers, machine guns, and other fire-arms. In these cases how can the origin of the weapons still be traced?
7. What is a "crime index"?
8. If a stranger were introduced to a card game as Mr. Hemingway, the chances are that he wouldn't be the famous author. But what would you know about him?
9. What are the principal classifications of fingerprints?
10. When a criminologist speaks of tattooing, he may be referring to the fanciful designs worked into the skin with a tattooing needle and inks. But the chances are that he is speaking of tattooing in connection with his profession. What would he mean?

In June of this year your Editor received the following letter from Pierce Atwater, II, a teacher in Bowie High School, El Paso, Texas: "Knowing your interest in the history and development of the mystery story," wrote Mr. Atwater, "I thought you might like to peep into the crystal ball. Therefore, I am forwarding the enclosed manuscript, not because of any literary merit, but because of the interest I believe to be intrinsic in the stories.

"Originals of the stories are available for inspection in my personal files. I have given them the barest amount of editing, only enough to make them readable. In addition to this I have furnished a continuity for them, and some comments about them, to give the manuscript a unified appearance. There is a good deal of unconscious humor which I have not bothered to point up. It might be appropriate for some sort of editorial comment.

"This entire project has been on my own initiative throughout although I have called the matter to the attention of the authorities. [A letter was also enclosed in which H. V. Williams, Jr., Principal of Bowie High School, confirmed the foregoing and added his own personal recommendation.]

"My own interest in detective fiction is great enough to convince me that your readers would enjoy these stories."

We agree — readers of EQMM should enjoy this foray into the future of the detective story; and as for editorial comment, Mr. Atwater's letter does the job admirably. We also agree with Mr. Atwater's optimism, and we congratulate Mr. Atwater, Mr. Williams the Principal, and Bowie High School on their remarkably progressive and imaginative approach to modern education. Yes, the day will come — and not too soon — when a first-class detective story will be considered suitable literary material for high school and college study — yes, even in English literature courses. And we'll guarantee one thing right now: the students will do their homework and collateral reading with the kind of interest and passionate curiosity which, properly fostered, lead to true scholarship and a deeper understanding of the bypaths of literature.

MURDER, 1970

by PIERCE ATWATER, II

PATIENTLY the teacher explained the assignment again.

"I want you to write a story. It doesn't have to be very long. In fact, the shorter the better."

He didn't relish the idea of correcting forty papers and thought he might as well emphasize the point.

"Remember, you can get the reader's interest if your story begins with conversation. Try to create interest in what you have to say as early as possible."

Forty faces stared at him. They were expressionless. José was interested, but blank. Concha was lost and had begun looking around the room. Juan and Arnulfo were whispering. It was obvious that not one student in the entire 8th grade had any idea of what the teacher was talking about. It was irritating. Not for the first time he felt a rising urge toward homicide.

Bowie High School sweltered beneath the sun. Wind whipped over the desert and hot sand from New Mexico moved into El Paso, Texas. The brilliant sunlight reflected from tile roofs; throats were dry and shirts were wet. The Latin-American children in the school were tired and restless as the end of the day approached. The teacher was tired, too — tired of his endless struggle to make children of an alien language understand what he was saying.

"Look," he said. "I have to read your papers. I want you to get me interested in them. Put some suspense in them, build them up, make me . . . "

Suddenly little Santiago's hand flew up.

"Suspense? You mean like in a mystery story, mister?"

The teacher sighed deeply.

"That's the idea, Santiago. Suspense, just like in a mystery story. Make me wonder what comes next, keep me interested. Try to surprise me in the end."

It had registered. The class was awake again, nodding their little heads, a glad light of comprehension showing in their faces. The teacher was still cautious, however.

"Now remember, class, we are studying punctuation. I want you to use conversation to build up the suspense. Have your characters talk to each other, but don't forget to use quotation marks. Don't forget to start a new paragraph when a second person begins to speak. I will base your grades on how well you punctuate your stories. I don't care what subject you write about — choose anything you wish — but put some suspense, some interest, in it."

The bell was about to ring. Irma was gesturing to Margarita and Olga was winking at Oscar. The class now understood the assignment. They could write about anything they liked so long as it had "suspense" in it.

When the room was empty the teacher slowly picked up his materials. As a passing thought he wondered how his group of Latin-American youngsters happened to have the word "suspense" in their vocabularies.

The following day, after school, he settled down to read the papers. It seemed that each of his little devils had written several pages instead of the one he hoped to get. It would take a long time to correct the papers, but — Oh, well, he sighed and took up his red pencil. After all, the assignment

had been about punctuation.

He searched through the papers until he found the one submitted by Patricia Montes. There was a girl to be relied upon. A quick look proved it. A nice story about how she and her sister had been frightened by a noise at the window. The explanation was held till the end. Suspense. Yes, there was conversation, too, and it was punctuated properly. Some mistakes in grammar and spelling, but he reminded himself that it was only the 8th grade, age range from 12 to 15 years, and that perfection could not be expected. "A" for Patricia.

The next paper appeared, at first glance, to be much the same, and he began to read . . .

THE SPOOKY HOUSE

by

Irma Méndez

It was a dark night, and the moon was full, and the night was very quiet.

At ten oclock when all were asleep, and the bells began to ring — tintong, and the wind was blowing slowly — then a shadow passed by the door of the spooky house.

Then about eleven thirty the shadow came again, and he opened the door of one of the bed rooms, and it was the men's bed room.

Then the watchman heard a scream yelling for help, and it was a terrible scream, yelling, "Ay-ay — a-y — a — y ——."

Then the watchman came to see what was the matter, and the first thing he saw was the shadow who was there with a big sack. But it wasn't really a shadow. It was a terrible man with a sack full of human heads.

Then the watchman. . . . . .

The teacher mopped his brow. At that point he didn't care what the watchman did. "Suspense," he had said. Well, he supposed he was getting suspense, but it was not exactly what he had anticipated.

Quickly he glanced through the rest of the story. As he had feared, no conversation, no punctuation, no English grammar. But plenty of "suspense," as Irma Méndez had interpreted the word.

He looked through three or four more papers and they were all the same sort of thing. His little exercise in punctuation was becoming a Frankenstein's monster. Each paper was devoted to a description of the finest collection of horrors that could be conjured out of an untrained Latin mind. A sack full of human heads — Wow!

His eye fell on another paper and he felt better. That boy was a nice normal kid, a nuisance in class but not a bad fellow. The first sentence suggested a typical Western story, at least a change from horror, so the teacher began to read.

CARSON FINDS A BANDIT

by

Benjamin Rivera

Rip Carson was a fourteen year old boy from the Flying-T ranch.

One day he saw that a reward poster that had been tacked to a tree had been torn down. There were still four nails in the trunk of the tree with bits of paper sticking to them.

"That's strange," he thought. "I wonder who did that? Yesterday there was a reward poster for an outlaw named Smoke Danver on that tree, and now somebody has torn it. There hasn't been enough wind for the poster to blow down." But he remembered every word of the description of the wanted outlaw. Smoke Danver was six feet tall, had black hair, a dark mustache, and was a dangerous man.

He suddenly reined in his horse and sat in the saddle as he heard the sound of shots coming from a canyon to the south of him. He listened, but the gunfire did not continue.

"Sounds like trouble," he thought. "I better go see what happened." He rode to the canyon and found a stranger standing over another man who was lying on the ground.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

The stranger turned and Carson saw the man wore a sheriff's star on his shirt.

"I'm sheriff Lane," he said. "I've been trailing this outlaw and finally got him."

"Sheriff Lane from Beaver County?" asked Carson. He rode closer and looked at the man lying on his back on the ground. The boy noticed a lot of tiny holes in the left side of the unconscious man's shirt. "I'm glad you got your man, sheriff," said Carson. He glanced over his shoulder as a bunch of riders appeared. "There are some men from my outfit."

Carson rode over to his men. The five men halted and listened as the boy talked; then they all started their horses and rode to the spot where the lawman and his prisoner were.

"So you got your man," said one of the men. "The boy tells me that you're sheriff Lane from over in Beaver County?"

"That's right," said the stranger, "and this man is Smoke Danver."

"Wrong," said Carson. "You are Smoke Danver and that is sheriff Lane lying there unconscious! You took his badge and put it on as soon as you shot him and he became unconscious from the wound. Those little pin holes in his shirt were made by him having pinned his badge on many times. You tore down the poster of yourself hoping no one would recognize you, but you guessed wrong."

Then Smoke Danver grabbed for his gun, but did not draw when he saw that the men had him covered.

"You might have got away with it if the boy hadn't been smart," said one of the men. "He tricked you. There's a sheriff Lane all right — but there isn't any Beaver County around here!"

The teacher was astonished. Western, bah! Ben had written an out-and-out detective story with a Western setting. He had used three specific tricks, in an incredibly short space, all of which were characteristic of the detective story. There was actually a

touch of the Holmes technique in the quick surprise-ending and in the final clinching fact.

This was not sheer imagination. This was reasonably decent story-telling. The tone, the names, the fourteen-year-old boy — all smacked of the Dime Western. But the logic and the closely knit plot were straight detective, although somewhat resembling the movies.

Movies? Suddenly the teacher got the picture. The movies were the answer. "Suspense" was a common word in a cinema advertisement. It was used for mystery, horror, and Western movies. And the movies were a common denominator for all children. That was why the word "suspense" was so readily understood, and also why it was so differently interpreted.

The next paper was from José Mariscal, a clever boy who studied his English and liked to play with words. Having discovered the creative background for the papers, the teacher thought José's effort would be interesting.

THE BIG-HEARTED KILLER

by

José Mariscal

The night was silent, dead, dreary, and a misty fog was floating around the lights near the dock. A mysterious figure could be seen crouching among the shadows of the buildings. —— Later a terrified scream was heard. Exactly two seconds passed, and again the crouching figure, carefully looking back to see if anyone was behind him, went in the direction from which he first came. The figure disappeared; again the night was dead, silent — and bloody!

The next day on the front page of the morning paper the headline read:

BIG GAMBLER MURDERED!

That night a broad shouldered man passed the exact spot where the scream was heard the night before. He passed several times and each time looked down and up and sideways. Who was this mysterious man? . . . . . Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh! He was that famous supersleuth of the detective world. He stood there almost fifteen minutes; then he disappeared into the darkness of the night.

The night passed and nothing happened. But the next day again appeared the crouching figure, gun in hand, already taking aim at a leaning man upon a wall.

A figure jumped up and tackled the armed man. Policemen came out from everywhere.

After the police had the killer well in hand, the great detective explained.

"The killer made one mistake. He was going to kill gamblers because he had lost a fortune gambling. But the mistake he made was that he dropped a card with his name and address on it. So that's how I got my hunch!"

So ends another thrilling story of the "Supersleuth of the Detective World".

Beneath the story, with six excla-

mation points, José had written: "It's Corny!!!!!!"

After his laughter had died away, the teacher wrote on the paper, "You're right. It's corny!" But he couldn't help thinking, "So that's the way Ellery Queen looks to a twelve-year-old boy!"

But a more sobering thought followed. Wasn't there a strong comic-book influence in that story? José was a clever kid, but what would happen if a clever boy's literary taste should stick with comic-book "supersleuths" instead of falling in with the more rational figures of the detective fiction world?

Unable to answer the question, the teacher turned to the papers again. He pulled out one that was six pages long in a labored handwriting. This was the sort of thing he always feared. None of the children were good enough to write that much and maintain a decent standard — or so he thought. With a shrug of his shoulders, a trick he had picked up from his Latin students, he began to read. Then he chuckled, because the girl had used a pen-name.

POINTER TO MURDER

by

Lee Markward

(Magdalena Padilla)

Out in a whirling fog, a little white angel and a big red devil kept calling, "Horseface, come on!" Inside my head an agonizing hammer was pounding — slam, slam, slam. Reprovingly I looked at the angel.

I felt a little hurt that the angel should be calling me Horseface instead of sheriff Hardy, even if practically everyone in Midge County hadn't any better manners either. Glaring at the devil I said, "Go away."

But it was the angel who faded out. The devil had hold of me and was shaking me.

"Ataboy, Horseface," he said. "Now we're going."

I was sure I knew that voice. It was my tall, ex-GI deputy, Humphry Blaine. I couldn't see him.

I tried to get up. But something wet came against my face and pushed me back. Humphry said, "Take it easy, Horseface. I never knew a guy your age had that much blood."

The last of the fog cleared away from my eyes and I could see some little clouds playing tag with a half-moon.

"Let me up, you nit-wit," I said angerly. "I've got to find George Lee."

"I've already found him." Humps' voice was matter of fact. "He's down at the edge of the creek. Dead."

"Careful! You'll start the blood again," Humps' snapped. "A middle-aged guy like you can't take those whallops."

"Take me to George Lee," I said.

He was dead all right. He lay face down at the edge of the water. Someone had rained blows on his head, crushing the skull.

In the beam of Humps' flashlight I could see the marks where the

body had slid down the bank.

Lee was one of the two richest men in Midgeville, the county seat. The other was his brother, Howard. Howard had been in ill health for several years, a bed-ridden invalid. It was common knowledge that he wasn't going to live much longer.

And that was why Humps Blaine found me knocked out cold on Lee's farm.

Howard Lee's wife had asked me to go tell Lee that she needed him. "I've sent Denton for medicine the doctor prescribed," she said, "and Mr. Chase is out of town."

Denton, I knew, was the Howard Lee chauffer, a thrifty young guy who saved most of his money and never frequented the local beer joints.

George used his farm for hunting and fishing, and what little farming was done he left to his caretaker, Grant Spain, who lived on the place. Many a night he and Spain sat on the bank of the little creek which ran across the farm.

"Who hit you on the head? Was it Spain?" Humps asked.

"Could have been. Yeah, it was his build, tall and slim. Have you seen him around here tonight?"

Humps shook his head. "Neither him nor his dog."

The dog followed Spain around everywhere.

Humps went to break the news to Mrs. Howard Lee.

From behind me came a voice dripping with venom. "Get your hands up yourself, you big baboon. Drop that gun and turn around."

Frozen through, I turned still holding the flashlight. Five feet away on its beam, leveling a small automatic, stood Mrs. Howard Lee. She wore darks slacks and a dark kerchief covered her yellow hair. Her eyes were cold and murderous. I had not expected her to take a personal hand in the affair, too.

"You're covered, so you needn't try to blind her with that light," came Denton's growl. "Drop it if you don't want a slug in the back."

I let my flashlight follow my gun to the ground.

"Frisk him, Jack," Donna Lee said.

Denton's hands went over me and got the extra gun I had stashed in a shoulder holster under my shirt.

With an effort I kept my voice calm. "So it was hanky-panky with the handsome chauffer while your husband was dying, huh? So you're the killer? You'll go to prison today!"

The story simply stopped there. No explanation, no suggestion of how the sheriff got away to take the criminals to jail. It just stopped. But the teacher didn't pay much attention to that fact.

His mind was full of more important matters. He had been a disciple of the detective story for many years. He had read them all, from Poe to the most modern, and enjoyed them all. It now dawned on him that he was getting a preview of the mystery story of 1970.

And what had he discovered about

it? That Humphrey Bogart, the comic-books, pulp Westerns, and finally the radio — Magdalena's story was obviously influenced by radio's "tough guys" — were guiding the minds of children toward a new species of detective story. The trite Hollywood moral structure was there. "Supersleuth" was closer to "Superman" than he was to Edgar Wallace. "A sack full of human heads" smacked of movie "Frankensteins" more than of "Night Must Fall." And "hanky-panky with the handsome chauffer" could easily be traced to the moment that Dick Powell gave up singing for a living. "Suspense," to the children, was created by a series of ridiculous artificialities. The detective story, judging by the work of these children, was rapidly becoming a thing of the past. Modern influences were tearing apart a time-honored tradition.

Slowly the teacher went back over the manuscripts. And as he did so, calmer thoughts began to subdue the turmoil in his brain. He remembered that all his kids were Latin-American, that many of them could barely speak English. Yet José had written, "The night was silent, dead, dreary, and a misty fog was floating around the lights near the dock." Not bad, that, especially when one considered that José had probably never seen a dock. And what about Ben's steady build-up to a climax? Surely all the logic and inevitability of a legitimate detective story was there. And Maggie's ". . . little clouds playing tag with a half-moon" was nothing less than beautiful. What if it was a radio trick? It worked as well, perhaps better, in a story.

Murder, 1970. How would the kids write when they were more mature? Some of the crudity would be certain to go. The sack full of heads would become a small box filled with an unmentionable horror. The card with the killer's name and address would become the one small, clever clue which would give the killer away. The direct logic of the fourteen-year-old cowboy would change into something more subtle and more entertaining. And Magdalena's sheriff would manage to capture the murderer after threatening to take him to jail. The teacher chuckled as he remembered that one.

He was becoming reconciled to the future. If these kids, with their wildfire Latin imaginations, would only keep trying, keep interested, learn and keep the faith of detective-story fans, then the future looked bright rather than futile. Murder, 1970, might well become something worth waiting for.

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THOUGH YOUR SINS BE AS SCARLET

Stephen Vincent Benét won the Pulitzer Prize for poetry in 1929; yet at the time of his death, in 1943, he had only just begun to strike his literary stride, and no one can tell now to what really great heights he might have attained. Today we remember him best as a writer of ballads of the very first rank and as the foremost writer in his generation of short stories in the American folk-lore vein. His outstanding achievements were JOHN BROWN'S BODY *and* THE DEVIL AND DANIEL WEBSTER, *and both works will live long in American letters . . . Though primarily a poet and a prose-poet, Mr. Benét must have been interested in all forms and techniques of writing. It is a matter of record that he tried his hand even at the detective story, as proved by "The Amateur of Crime" which appeared in "The American Magazine," April, 1927. The date would seem to be significant. In 1926 S. S. Van Dine's first Philo Vance book was published and became an immediate and sensational success. Was Benét influenced, like so many others, by the Van Dine gold-strike? If "The Amateur of Crime" were Benét's first detective story, we might be inclined to think so — under similar circumstances, even Shakespeare and Dante might have been tempted to whip up a few clues and red herrings to keep their own pots boiling. But it is also a matter of record that Mr. Benét challenged the technique of the detective story even before Van Dine did: as early as 1924, two years ahead of* THE BENSON MURDER CASE, *Stephen Vincent Benét had a detective short story published under his own name in a "lowly" pulp magazine. (We shall bring you this story soon.)*

But getting back to Mr. Benét's 1927 detective story: the sleuth is a young undergraduate named Peter Scarlet who wears horn-rimmed spectacles and has an owlish look. His speech and mannerisms will remind you somewhat of Margery Allingham's famous detective, Albert Campion — but again statistics fly to Mr. Benét's defense. There is no possibility whatever that Mr. Benét patterned Scarlet on Campion — the first Campion story was not written by Margery Allingham until 1928, one year after Mr. Benét's was already in print.

Nevertheless, it is fairly safe to deduce that when Mr. Benét wrote "The Amateur of Crime," he was merely experimenting. For one thing, he chose the most difficult of detective-story gambits for any beginner — the locked room — and it must be confessed (as a matter of simple justice to an earlier writer, Burton E. Stevenson) that Benét offered no new solution to the old basic problem. For his background he again selected a far-from-original idea: he combined Long Island high society with international

intrigue — a variation of the thematic material which such diverse authors as E. Phillips Oppenheim and George Barr McCutcheon had been exploiting for years. And among his clues Mr. Benét was not above using the "curious incision on the dead man's forehead — two little slashes that formed a capital T" — and using it, moreover, without fairness-to-the-reader.

But while "The Amateur of Crime" presents frankly derivative plotting, it does possess one earmark all its own — Stephen Vincent Benét's dialogue. You will find interesting talk in this story, and interesting talk, especially since the death of Gilbert K. Chesterton, is not commonly found in tales of detection — and interesting talk, let us never forget, is also one of the infallible signs of quality of the mind.

THE AMATEUR OF CRIME

by STEPHEN VINCENT BENÉT

"And what is *your* hobby, Mr. Scarlet?" queried Mrs. Culverin kindly of her shyest guest. Her long, pendent earrings of antique crystal winked like tiny stars as she turned upon him the full battery of her celebrated smile.

"Murder," said the owlish young man in the English dinner-jacket, serenely. Mrs. Culverin gave a slight, pleased scream.

In a day of hostesses who were famous for rules, and hostesses who were notorious for breaking them, Mrs. Culverin achieved unique celebrity as a hostess who seemed to recognize no rules at all. At the moment she was opening her Long Island house for the summer, and the company gathered to celebrate the event could hardly have been more diverse had Mrs. Culverin deliberately planned it so. But Mrs. Culverin never planned anything deliberately.

This particular house party included, among others, Prince Mirko, of Ruritania, head of the Ruritanian debt commission to the United States; his extraordinarily beautiful wife; Baron Kossovar, the Ruritanian Ambassador; Daisy Delight, the cinema star; a bishop; a banker; a bandmaster; the most celebrated dance expert of the moment; two débutantes; the woman's Olympic diving champion; a blind pianist; a Mr. Lang, who was vaguely spoken of as a big-game hunter, and Peter Scarlet — the last, a pink-cheeked youth with surprised, mouse-colored hair which, together with his enormous horn-rimmed spectacles, gave him much of

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the innocent downiness of a very young owl.

Mrs. Culverin could not remember exactly what he did, or exactly why she had asked him; but, as she was often in the same quandary about many of her guests, the fact perturbed her not at all. He neither smoked opium in his bedroom nor attempted to secrete small articles of silverware about his person — and as these were the only two social solecisms her generous heart admitted, she felt satisfied enough with him, whoever he might be.

But when he spoke of murder, she viewed him with a new and acquisitive eye. So far, it must be admitted, her Long Island housewarming had leaned perilously toward the verge of failure. The bishop, though a liberal bishop, had lifted episcopal eyebrows at the dancer. The banker had insisted on talking statistics. The Olympic diving champion had had too much of a cold to exhibit her skill — and the Ruritanians had been so freezingly polite to each other that a pall of gentility had descended upon the whole assemblage. Mrs. Culverin suddenly remembered, with that vagueness that characterized her memories, having heard of some tiresome, political feud between Prince Mirko and Baron Kossovar.

Now, however, young Mr. Scarlet's unexpected admission of his unusual hobby seemed to give her a heaven-sent opportunity of redeeming her dinner party. She raised her voice to carry to the end of the table.

"How quaint!" she said, with relish. "Mr. Scarlet knows all about murders — or murdering — which was it, Mr. Scarlet? Do tell us lots about them, anyhow!" And she patted him approvingly on the arm.

The young man, thus abruptly singled out as the object for the stares of the whole company, looked more owlish than ever. A faint pink flush mounted slowly toward his ears.

"Mrs. Culverin flatters me," he said, looking at his plate. "I don't know all about murders — or murderers, either. But, yes, I am — interested in them."

"You are a detective, Mr. Scarlet, yes?" queried Prince Mirko, in his careful English.

"No, Your Highness. Merely an amateur of crime."

The princess laughed — a long, beautiful ripple of laughter. "An amateur of crime!" she said, giving the words a foreign twist. "Think of it, Mirko! At his age — an amateur of crime! But I thought you were — what is it? — an undergraduate at an American university, Mr. Scarlet?"

"I am, Madame. I'm going back to college Monday," muttered Scarlet, obviously abashed. "But, well — you ought to start in young at any profession, oughtn't you? And — I've had certain opportunities, in a way. At least, my father was in the diplomatic service, so we traveled around a lot when I was a kid —"

A pleased expression crossed Prince Mirko's face: "If I am right, your father was *chargé d'affaires* at our

capital, Mr. Scarlet — let me see — in my father's time?"

Scarlet nodded rapidly. "Yes, Your Highness. I was only so high, then; but I remember your father." He smiled. "I used to be terrified by his beard."

"And Baron Kossovar — you remember him too?" asked the prince, with an acid smile.

"I'm afraid not, sir," said Scarlet pleasantly. "I think Baron Kossovar was away from Ruritania at the time."

"I was in exile — a very unjust exile," said the tall baron, coldly. His glance and Prince Mirko's were two rapiers clashing together. Again a constraint fell on the party.

"But, Mr. Scarlet, do tell us all about your murders!" said Mrs. Culverin brightly.

Scarlet grinned boyishly: "They aren't really my murders, Mrs. Culverin. I've just studied a bit — thing fascinated me. I mean — the queer kinds of people who are murderers, and the even queerer kinds who are murderees."

"Murderees?" breathed Mrs. Culverin. "Murderees?"

"Yes — that's what Pearson calls them, in his book." His spectacles flashed. "The people who seem just born and bound to be murdered. Who have the same irresistible attraction for a murderer that — a nice, plump goat has for a hungry tiger."

"I think it's all perfectly horrid!" said Mrs. Culverin delightedly. "Do go on!"

"Well," said Peter Scarlet, "there was the Jamison case, in London. Mrs. Jamison was an ideal murderee. She had an acquaintance, Mrs. Wheen. She knew Mrs. Wheen hated her. She often said so to her friends. She even said, several times, that she was sure Mrs. Wheen would murder her if she got a chance. And yet, for some unfathomable reason, she kept on going to tea with Mrs. Wheen until, finally, of course, Mrs. Wheen did murder her."

"Served her right," said Mrs. Culverin, with a beaming smile. "I'm sure, if I ever got the idea that anyone would murder me, I — I'd never so much as ask them to dinner again!"

A general chuckle followed her pronouncement. But Peter Scarlet stuck to his guns. "You wouldn't — because you're not a murderee," he said. "Most people aren't — most people never contract elephantiasis, either. But there is a certain proportion of people who do both, and a very definite proportion. Of course," — he spread out his hands — "there are the normal, casual murders, too. But I'm talking of this one peculiar tendency."

"And you think," said the somber Mr. Lang, "that you could diagnose — a tendency to be murdered, in an otherwise normal person, as a doctor could diagnose illness in a person who looked perfectly well?"

"That's what I'd like to do," said Peter Scarlet ingenuously. "Oh, I know it sounds fantastic, especially from me. But if you could do that and safeguard the murderee, as mod-

ern science safeguards the diabetic, why, half our present murders would never occur at all!"

Mrs. Culverin struck in. "But this is marvelous!" she said, her eyes very wide. "Just like numerology and reading your fate in tea leaves, only so much more exciting! Do tell us, dear Mr. Scarlet, because you can, of course — are any of us — murderees?"

Peter Scarlet looked very unhappy. "I couldn't, honestly," he managed to reply at last. "I mean — even if some of you did have murderee tendencies — well, you'd allow a doctor some time for a diagnosis and some rather intimate information, wouldn't you? Well —" He obviously did not wish to go on.

Mrs. Culverin, however, was insistent. "But you could just give us a hint?" she persisted. "The tiniest hint! It would be too wonderful!"

Peter Scarlet's eyes roved nervously up and down the table. "Well —" he said dolefully, and paused.

"You need not be afraid to say it!" said Prince Mirko, abruptly, with unexpected grimness. "I know there would be rejoicing — in many quarters — if I were to die by violence."

"And there are others whose murder would please certain men in my country. Myself, for one," said Baron Kossovar instantly. Again his eyes and the prince's met, with the impact of steel upon steel. The princess's hand went nervously to her breast.

Scarlet did his best to smooth over the awkward moment. "Any statesman's life is always at the mercy of a fanatic's bullet," he said, with a little bob at both Ruritanians. "But, oddly enough, if I had to decide at first glance upon the one person in this room who stood the likeliest chance of meeting a violent end, I should select — Mr. Lang!" he ended unexpectedly, with a nod in that gentleman's direction.

Mr. Lang gave a slight but definite start. For a moment his eyes blazed with anger. Then he gave a loud laugh — and the tension in the room relaxed.

"Not bad at all, for getting out of a hole," he said, still laughing: "I suppose you could be murdered by a lion — if you'd want to call it that — and my last trip out from Nairobi —" He plunged into a big-game reminiscence, and the talk grew general again.

"Only, I wasn't thinking about lions," murmured Peter Scarlet to his plate. But no one at the table overheard him.

Some time later, after the ladies had left the room, Scarlet found himself near the banker.

"You nearly put your foot in it then, my boy," said the latter, in a low voice, glancing down the table at Prince Mirko and Baron Kossovar. "You know what this Ruritanian debt commission means, I suppose?"

"I know the prince and the baron are old enemies," admitted Scarlet, "and that the baron is supposed to look for a return of the monarchy — in Ruritania — while the prince is entirely committed to the new republic."

"Just so," said the banker. "And if Mirko succeeds in his mission, he and the republic win — and Kossovar's political future isn't worth *that!* On the other hand, if he fails, the republic will undoubtedly go to pot, and Kossovar will be the power behind the return of the throne. The way things are at present, the prince seems sure to win, too," he added thoughtfully. "He's going down to Washington, Monday, to clinch it."

On their way to the lesser drawing-room where the Royal Russian Midgets, especially brought down for the occasion, were to perform their celebrated though Lilliputian feats of acrobatics before the dancing began, Peter Scarlet was accosted by the saturnine Mr. Lang.

"What the dickens did you mean by picking me out as a likely target for murder?" he queried, in a tone whose attempted lightness was not wholly successful.

Peter Scarlet looked at him steadily. "I wonder," he said. "Have you ever shot a Lipmann's gazelle, Mr. Lang?"

Mr. Lang seemed both amazed and piqued by the odd query. "Lipmann's gazelle?" he said. "Well, I have, as it happens — managed to bag a brace near Victoria Nyanza. But what the deuce has that got to do with my being murdered?"

"It might have a good deal, under certain circumstances," said Peter Scarlet cryptically, and turned away.

He watched with apparent interest the agile feats of the Russian midgets, and the little pantomime of "Beauty and the Beast" that concluded their performance. But within his mind, all the while, certain dim, half-remembered pictures were beginning to take on form and color and perspective. He shook his head, wearily — the pictures weren't very pleasant pictures; and yet he must fit them together, somehow. Only he couldn't quite recollect a few of the most important ones — yet.

At the end of the little entertainment, as the Blue Boy Blue Blowers began to blare out their invitation to the dance from the larger ballroom, he unobtrusively sought the princess.

She looked drawn and tired — the continual friction between her husband and the baron was obviously telling upon her. He made some compliment, to which she replied mechanically; then his glance fell upon an ornament in her hair.

"I am glad you still keep up the old Ruritanian custom, Madame," he said.

She laughed a little. "The dagger, you mean? Yes — all our girls pin their hair with a little dagger on feast-days — you must remember." She withdrew the small, needle-pointed, silver stiletto from the dark coils of her coiffure, so that he might examine it. "It is a family thing," she said, the weariness returning to her face. "You must have seen many like it in Ruritania."

Her expression changed, she lowered her voice. "Did you mean what you said tonight — that Mr. Lang was in greater danger of his life

here than my husband?" she asked with a sudden, queer intensity, as they paused on their way to the door.

Peter Scarlet looked at her with an expression of humble surprise. "I didn't say quite that," he said embarrassedly. "Do you mean that you have any reason to suspect that . . . your husband is in danger here?"

She made a nervous, pathetic little gesture with her hands. "Oh no, no, no!" she said hurriedly. "Oh no — it is impossible — impossible — and yet —"

Baron Kossovar came up to them. "May I have the honor of the first dance, Madame?" he asked, bowing profoundly as the princess replaced the dagger in her hair.

The evening wore on, the Blue Boy Blue Blowers outdid themselves in miracles of syncopation; at last Peter Scarlet found himself ready for bed. Alone in his room, he undressed for the night. Then, with the same neat, unhurried swiftness, he dressed himself completely again. It was no use — he couldn't sleep till one question at least had been decided in his mind. He left his room and, walking with a singular lack of noise for so ingenuous and blundering a young man, made his way toward the wing of the house where the Ruritanians were quartered.

Prince and Princess Mirko's suite was on the second floor; Baron Kossovar's, above, on the third. The house itself was a curious example of architectural misalliance between Long Island and Spain. Odd, useless balconies jutted from it at unexpected corners; there was one at the end of the corridor which Scarlet now traversed, and another, he knew, outside the princess's bedroom.

As Scarlet came down the corridor, walking more loudly now, a low voice challenged him suddenly. "Who's that?" said a fierce whisper.

Scarlet stood perfectly still. "It's Scarlet, Mr. Lang."

There was a sound of breath taken in. "How in —" said the low voice. Then it changed its tone. "I thought your room was in the other wing of the house," it said.

Scarlet smiled to himself in the dim shadows of the corridor. "I thought yours was too, Mr. Lang," he said easily. "But I felt restless, couldn't get to sleep."

"So did I," said Lang, unconvincingly. "Well — I suppose we'd both of us better get back to bed."

"I suppose so," admitted Scarlet, strolling on to the end of the corridor. He stepped out upon the balcony for a moment and glanced up.

"H'm," he said, "that iron stair must go to the third-floor balcony. Convenient little dingus for a burglar, wouldn't you say?"

"Infernally convenient," admitted Lang, with a certain tenseness. "Well —" This time his hand fell definitely upon Scarlet's shoulder, and the latter permitted himself to be led back toward his own wing of the house. Mr. Lang paused outside a door halfway down the Ruritanian corridor.

"Well, here I am," he said. "Good

night, Scarlet. And I wouldn't go wandering about at night if I were you. It isn't done — take the word of an older man."

Scarlet seemed entirely unperturbed by the rebuke. He walked noisily back to his own room and waited there for some time. Then he emerged again, slipped up to the third floor, retraced his way to the Ruritanian wing, and concealed himself on the third-floor balcony. He had hardly done so when the tall figure of Baron Kossovar ascended from the second floor and entered his quarters. Scarlet smiled, and devoted his attention to another point. A little while later his vigil was rewarded by a curious sight that gave him much food for thought. But it was not until half an hour at least had passed that he heard the scream from the second floor.

Twenty seconds later he was outside the door of Prince Mirko's suite — but the mysterious Mr. Lang was there before him, now rapping upon the door with a sort of muffled fury, now trying to force the lock with what looked suspiciously like a skeleton key.

He saw Scarlet and wheeled. A revolver glittered suddenly in his other hand. "You infernal meddler —" he began furiously, motioning him back; but Scarlet continued to advance.

"Oh, shut up!" he said, somewhat tiredly. "I know you're a detective — known it for hours. You get in that room — I'll keep the others back."

Lang gave him one sharp, very searching glance, then turned back to his work with the key. After a moment the lock yielded — the door flew open.

Scarlet, glancing in at the room over Lang's shoulder, felt the bristles at the back of his neck begin to rise. Prince Mirko of Ruritania lay on his face in the middle of the luxurious sitting-room, dead, with the hilt of a silver dagger protruding from his neck. The princess knelt beside him. Her hands were stained with his blood, her eyes were staring, and the silver dagger ornament was gone from her hair. A tiny handkerchief lay on the floor, and a little white dog ran in circles about the body, moaning and whining.

As Scarlet was turning away, the princess succeeded in rolling the body over on its back. There was a curious incision on the dead man's forehead — two little slashes that formed a capital T.

When the initial confusion of the event had somewhat subsided, a strange court of inquiry met in the disfigured sitting-room. Luckily, Mrs. Culverin's house was huge, and many of the guests had not been aroused at all. Those who had, Peter Scarlet sent back to bed again, with the news that Princess Mirko's maid had suffered a minor accident. As for Mrs. Culverin herself, she had risen to the crisis astonishingly, and she now sat patting Princess Mirko's limp hand with a certain sturdy kindliness that made Peter Scarlet like her better than he ever had before. Baron Kosso-

var, Lang, and Scarlet completed the party.

Mrs. Culverin rose at last. "Well, Mr. Lang," she said, "the matter is entirely in your hands. I'll do and say whatever you tell me. Meanwhile, I'll go back to my room, unless, Your Highness, you —" She turned to the princess.

"No," murmured the latter weakly. "No, thank you. You are very kind. But —"

"I know," said Mrs. Culverin. She gathered her wrapper about her. "Oh, one thing," she said to Lang, "if I might make a suggestion?"

"Yes, Mrs. Culverin?"

"You'll find that young man useful," she said, indicating Scarlet. "His talk about murders may be all bosh — but he knows Ruritanian." She swept away.

Lang turned to Scarlet. "You do speak and understand Ruritanian?"

Scarlet nodded. "Yes, I've kept it up fairly well."

Lang considered. "Well, I suppose you'd better stay," he said at last. "Only — no interference — no amateur detecting! And, naturally, if your father was in the Service, you understand the gravity of —"

Scarlet's face was very grave. "I do. And I shouldn't think of — interfering. But — I could make a suggestion? If one occurred to me?"

"You could," said Lang grimly. Scarlet's spectacles blinked.

Lang turned to the baron and the princess. "I have no wish to put impertinent questions," he said, with a good deal of dignity. "But you must realize, as I do, the very delicate position in which this murder has placed not only everyone in this house but the Governments of two countries. Prince Mirko was in this country under the protection of the United States. He was murdered while under that protection. Naturally, in view of the diplomatic issues involved, this inquiry cannot follow the normal course of such inquiries. But — I take it you both are willing to help me in finding the murderer?"

The princess stared at him, dry-eyed. "My husband's murderer must be found," she said in a dry, toneless voice.

Baron Kossovar stiffened. "Prince Mirko was my political enemy," he said; "but I am no less anxious than you, Mr. Lang, to find his murderer."

Lang received their statements gravely. "Thank you," he said. "Now — you'll pardon me if I'm frank — there are three ways in which Prince Mirko might have been murdered: He might have been murdered by an intruder from without. He might have been murdered by a servant or a guest. Or —"

"Say it," said the princess, in a dry, terrible voice. "He might have been murdered by me, his wife."

"Or me," said Baron Kossovar rigidly.

Lang made a little bow. "I regret the necessity," he said; "but we must take every supposition into account. First: the intruder from without. In the first place, my men — and they're

skilled men — have been guarding the gates and so forth since Prince Mirko's arrival. It would have been practically impossible for an intruder to get past them. In addition," — he stepped toward the window — "the windows of this room and of Prince Mirko's bedroom were all locked on the inside when we found the body; and it is a sheer fifteen-foot drop from the windows to the ground."

"Also," said the princess, still in that toneless voice, "I had locked the door from my part of the suite earlier in the evening. When I unlocked it again, it was to find my husband dead." She shuddered.

"I remember," said Lang noncommittally. "You wished to be alone?"

"For a time, yes — my husband and the baron were talking business; I did not wish to disturb them. Then later, I heard the dog barking and came to say good night to my husband — and then —"

"Yes," said Lang. "But even supposing the intruder had flown through the walls and got in — how did he get out? We made a thorough search. Of course he might have jumped from one of your bedroom windows, Princess, supposing you did not lock the door as you say you did."

"I did lock the door," said the Princess. "And — my maid, and myself, of course, were in our part of the suite the whole time. He could not have concealed himself or escaped."

"Exactly," said Lang. "Therefore, if there was an intruder, he is still here. But he isn't here. Therefore, Prince Mirko was not murdered by an intruder from without."

He paused. The logic of his explanation seemed inevitable. Scarlet took the opportunity to emerge from his silence.

"May I ask a question?" he said diffidently. Lang nodded.

"You didn't hear any sound of a struggle — a fall — either you or your maid?" he queried owlishly.

The princess seemed greatly perturbed. "No," she muttered. "That is strange — strange — yet the door was thick."

"Very thick," said Scarlet agreeably. "I wonder you heard the dog through it. Yet you did hear the dog barking."

The princess moved her hands. "Yes," she said weakly. "But that was the first we heard. It is — strange — yes, strange!"

It did not seem so strange to Lang. By the expression on his face it obviously seemed either impossible or untrue. But he resumed his questioning, with a scrupulous, heavy fairness.

"Then," he said, "we come to the valet and the maid. The valet's room did not communicate directly with the rest of the suite. I saw him go out before Baron Kossovar came to talk with Prince Mirko. He could not have entered again without my seeing him. So we may dismiss the valet. As for the maid — you insist, Princess, that she was under your eye all the time?"

"I do," said the Princess, in a ghost of a voice.

"Very well," said Lang. "Then we must dismiss the maid. As for another guest, or servant, getting in from the corridor — I was there on guard. I would have stopped and questioned anyone who came."

"Yes," said Scarlet; "you stopped and questioned me."

"And so you come to us," said the princess bluntly. Her voice rose. "Oh, it is terrible — terrible!" she said. "You suspect me — you have reason to suspect me! My husband is killed with the little dagger I wear in my hair — I do not hear him killed, though I hear a dog bark afterward — you find me beside his body when you come — you find a handkerchief too, a woman's handkerchief — you find —" her voice broke — "the mark on his face — And yet, I swear before God, I did not murder my husband!"

Baron Kossovar rose, his eyes burning. "But if you must suspect her, you must suspect me more!" he cried. "I was with him and we were talking, sometimes angrily, till half an hour before you found him dead. I had reason to kill him if I wished. I might have killed him — pretended to say good night to him at the door, so you could hear me and think he was still alive, and then gone back to my room, to be aroused by the news of his murder!"

"Only," said Scarlet quietly, "in that case, after you had said good night to the dead man, the dead man got up and locked the door after you."

"Well, he might have had strength enough left to do that," said the baron impatiently. "Or it might have been done somehow else, or —" Then his head drooped suddenly. "No, it is useless," he said; "I did not kill Mirko; I cannot pretend I did. But you should not suspect her, when you have better reason to suspect me."

"Ah, my friend, you are very noble," said the princess, lightly touching his hand with hers.

"You're both noble," said Scarlet dispassionately; "but you're both very silly. There is another possible murderer that Mr. Lang has not mentioned."

"And that is?" said the latter with a dangerous calm.

"Mr. Lang," said Scarlet demurely. "He might have got in with his masterkey after the baron left, murdered the prince, relocked the door, and —"

"But what reason would I have to murder Prince Mirko?"

"Oh, you might have had a dozen reasons," said Scarlet airily. "But you didn't. Because you wouldn't have used a dagger. You'd have shot him — or killed him with your hands — in the good old Anglo-Saxon way. On the other hand," he continued reflectively, "Madame is a Ruritanian and might very possibly use a dagger — especially this one." He lifted the stained weapon delicately from the table. "But Madame asserts that she lost her dagger-ornament earlier in

the evening and did not see it again till she found it in her husband's body."

"Yes," said the princess desperately, "that is true. The dagger fell from my hair. I do not know where. I do not know how. But at first, when I found it again" — she shivered — "I did not see how it could be mine."

Scarlet blinked. "I see. And then — the handkerchief." He replaced the dagger and took up a tiny square of fine linen. "Obviously not a man's handkerchief, from its size, and" — he sniffed it — "scented. But Madame asserts that the handkerchief is not hers, that she found it beside the body."

"Yes, I have never seen it before. It is not mine," said the princess, in the voice of an automaton, staring down at her feet as if she saw them already enmeshed in the net which Scarlet's diffident sentences slowly wove about her. Scarlet went on:

"Third point. The slash on the prince's forehead — the slash like a capital T. Well, that rather points to the baron, on the whole. At least, Mr. Lang, who has had great experience with Italian criminals, has informed us that a similar T-shaped slash is a common occurence in polititical assassinations — the 'T' being for 'Tradditore' or 'Traitor.' Now, the baron's political views might easily lead him to consider the prince a traitor to their mutual country. On the other hand, the T might be a blind — employed for the purposes of argument by Madame. Curious clues all of them; and yet the most curious thing of all is — that every one points in the same direction —"

"I'm afraid they do," said Mr. Lang heavily. "Princess Mirko —" he began in an official voice.

"But I did not murder my husband!" said the princess, with a terrified gasp.

"One moment," said Scarlet bashfully. "Think of the nature of the wound. The prince was a tall man — the wound was high on his neck and slanted down — such a wound as would suggest a tall assassin — woman or man. Now the baron and madame are both tall, but —"

"Stop!" said the baron suddenly. He turned to the princess. "It's no use, Nadja," he said. "One of us must speak to protect you. Gentlemen — Prince Mirko's wife was not even in this suite when her husband was murdered. She was on the balcony of my suite; I had asked her to come there — to talk of a private matter —"

The princess put her head in her hands with a gesture of utter defeat. "Oh, Stanislas, Stanislas!" she sobbed, "you have ruined everything. They will never believe me now!"

"Yes; I think that clinches it, if that's true," said Lang with austere triumph. "Gives a better motive than politics. And they both killed him. Princess Mirko —"

But Scarlet cut in before he could finish his sentence. "Oh, what the baron says is true enough," he said briskly. "I saw and heard them from the other balcony. Only your deduc-

tion's wrong, Lang. It wasn't a love affair — she went because she was worried about her husband. But why do you keep on calling her 'Princess Mirko'? She isn't really Princess Mirko, you know," he went on in tones of shy patience.

The princess raised terror-stricken eyes to his. Lang gasped.

"You mean that woman isn't the prince's wife?"

"Oh, yes; she was the prince's wife, right enough — she merely isn't and wasn't Princess Mirko. Have you never heard of a morganatic marriage? If she had been a princess," he concluded thoughtfully, "the murder, most probably, would never have been committed."

"I don't see why?" said Lang, with the air of a baited bull. "And I don't see why it makes any difference whether the princess was a princess or not. Someone murdered Prince Mirko — if it wasn't this woman here — what woman was it?"

"No woman murdered Prince Mirko," said Scarlet quietly.

"A man, then? What man? The baron?"

"Nor was the murderer of Prince Mirko a man, as we think of men."

"Well, then, in heaven's name, what was it?" cried Lang, in a sort of fury. "A ghost that walks through the walls? A gorilla? An act of God?"

Scarlet's eyes, behind his spectacles, danced with little points of light. "On that point," he said, with deceptive meekness, "I should like to take the evidence of the dog." He turned quickly to the princess. "The little white dog your husband was so fond of," he said. "The dog we found running about when we came in — do you remember when he was brought back to your suite this evening?"

"Why, yes," said the princess, with obvious bewilderment. "Stepan, the valet, brought him up from the kennels when we came back after the dancing; my husband liked to have him in his room at night."

"Ah," said Scarlet, obviously laboring under some mounting excitement. He flung open the door of the princess's room and whistled. The dog came bounding in, ran about for a moment, sniffing, then, lifting his head toward the ceiling, gave a long, doleful howl. The princess burst into tears.

"What in thunder do you think you'll get from the dog?" queried Lang. "And we know he's tracked up the carpet," he added as Scarlet stooped to examine certain dull red paw marks on the floor.

Scarlet straightened up, his whole body alive and tense. "Yes, we know he's tracked up the carpet," he said, in a voice like a trumpet; "but what we don't know is how he tracked up the wall!" And he pointed at a spot on the glazed wallpaper above a tall painted wardrobe — a muddy spot, near the ceiling, that looked singularly like the imprint of a dog's muddy paw.

For a moment none of the others could believe their eyes — and the

world seemed to slide and alter into a distorted and monstrous cosmos, where a little white dog could run up a wall like a fly, and a tall prince might be struck dead with a dagger wielded by neither a man's nor a woman's hand. Then Scarlet threw open the doors of the painted wardrobe. There was nothing there but an overcoat on a hook, some hats on a shelf above, and a large leather hat trunk beside the hats.

"We've looked through that wardrobe already," called Lang.

"No," said Scarlet; "you've only looked *at* it. For instance," — he shook out the overcoat — "here are the same kind of paw marks there are on the wall, only here the marks are bloody. While, as for the hat trunk —"

The dog burst into a fury of barking that drowned the rest of the sentence.

"For heaven's sake!" shouted Lang, in a final exasperation, "you don't expect to find the murderer of Prince Mirko inside a brown leather hatbox, do you?"

"That," said Scarlet, quite unruffled, "is precisely what I expect to find!"

He started gingerly to lift the hat trunk down from its shelf. As he did so, its lid popped open like the lid of a jack-in-the-box, and something bright and tiny struck at his eyes. There was an intense little scuffle for an instant; then Scarlet was holding out for Lang's inspection a kicking, fighting little creature hardly three feet high. The thing was grotesquely disguised in the stage-garb of a midget Beast, and its distorted lips poured forth a stream of denunciation in a hissing, clucking language that Lang did not understand.

"Permit me to present the murderer of Prince Mirko," said Scarlet, with a boyish flourish.

"Well, I'll be —" said Lang, with a long whistle. "One of those Russian midgets that played the pantomime! But what is he talking — Russian?"

"No," said Scarlet pensively, "Ruritanian. He's telling the princess — if we may give her her title — that she was always a bad sister to him, and he's glad he killed her husband; and she's telling him she hopes he hangs, if he *is* her brother. You see, the whole was what one might call a family affair," he added, with a touch of embarrassment.

Some time later, over cigarettes and full glasses, Lang and Peter Scarlet watched the dawn brighten the window of the latter's chamber, and discussed the extraordinary events of the night.

"But I don't see yet —" said Lang, and paused.

"Oh, I was very lucky," said Scarlet. "Very. Knowing Ruritanian — and some of the previous story. And then, hearing the princess and the baron on the balcony. Though, of course, the minute I saw the weapon I knew the baron hadn't committed the crime."

"Why?" said Lang, with heavy pa-

tience. Scarlet considered. He flushed.

"Sounds absurd — my trying to lay down the law to you," he said. "But — the baron had motive enough; but he wouldn't have killed that way. He might hack his enemy to bits with a cavalry saber; he wouldn't stab him with a toy. It wasn't in his character — as I'd heard of it, and knew it in other Ruritanian nobles of his sort."

"The princess might have stabbed, though," said Lang thoughtfully.

"Oh yes — she'd be a stabber, if she'd be anything," agreed Scarlet promptly. "But I also happened to know that she was devoted to her husband. In fact, she'd as much as told me that she was worried for his safety, earlier in the evening. I know now she was worried on two counts: Baron Kossovar, and the brother she thought she'd recognized among the midgets. She wasn't quite sure it was he — she hadn't seen him for years and he was made up as the Beast in the play. That was the real reason she had her talk with the baron above — though the baron used to be in love with her, right enough. She wanted to try and find out if the baron had recognized any of the midgets, either. She didn't dare ask her husband."

"Why not?"

"Well, that's a long story. I'll cut it as short as possible. But they *are* blood brother and sister."

"That beautiful women and that little deformity? It seems incredible."

"Not as incredible as it sounds. There have been numerous cases — one or two normal children in a family of giants or dwarfs, and vice versa. But Nadja was the only normal one in her family, except for a brother who died. The other two were midgets — two brothers. The family were small farmers, but proud as Lucifer. They'd been great people, long back. Well, Mirko came along and fell in love with Nadja, so much in love he was ready to make her his morganatic wife; but he couldn't stick her family — one can see why. And she was in love with him; so she married him. But her being willing to be his morganatic wife struck her family in their sorest point — their pride."

"They got ready to make trouble; and Mirko, very quietly, had them shipped to England — saw they got an allowance, but were never to come back to Ruritania. This was just the midget brothers, the old people were dead. So the midget brothers — they hadn't thought much of Nadja when they had her; in fact, they'd been pretty spiteful to her; but now she was their wronged sister — they were going to get Mirko if they ever had a chance. Then the war came along, and one brother died. The one who was left organized a troupe of performing midgets — when Mirko's allowance stopped coming after Ruritania was invaded by the Germans — and brought them over to America after the war."

"And — he got into the room —"

"With the help of the others.

Bribed them, probably. You saw them do their living tower on each other's shoulders. Well, they did it for him under the window, and it was just high enough to get him up to the window sill. The window was open — the valet locked it later. Then our friend hid on top of that wardrobe — he's an excellent acrobat for his size — and he probably swarmed up to the shelf by way of the overcoat and so on. That was how he got the mark on the wall. It looked like a paw mark because he was still wearing his Beast's costume from the pantomime — perhaps for a blind, perhaps because he didn't bother to change."

"While the marks on the carpet?" "Were some of them his and some of them the dog's. The handkerchief was his, too; it was scented, because, like many midgets, he was very vain. And the dagger that actually killed Mirko was his — one of a pair of family heirlooms. The princess was speaking the truth when she said she lost hers — it fell from her hair while she was on Kossovar's balcony. She got up there without your seeing her, by the same sort of little stair there was on the balcony you and I visited. And her maid was waiting for her on her own balcony. That's why neither of them heard the prince fall when he was killed — or cry out, if he did."

"I see; and, of course, the actual attack was entirely unexpected."

"Entirely. The little fiend waited with monumental patience till the prince was alone. Then, at some moment when the prince passed fairly near the wardrobe, he jumped at the back of his neck like a striking snake. You see, we deduced that, because the wound was high and slanted downward, it must have been made by someone tall. But put a short man on stilts and he's as tall as a giant. Our friend, with the aid of the wardrobe, was much taller than the prince. Then, when he'd killed his man, he marked him with that T — used his own pocketknife that time."

"T for traitor?"

"No; that was where your Italians missled you. The Ruritanian word for traitor begins with a J. But the Ruritanian word for seducer does begin with a T — and that was what he meant. That was what finally put me on the right track — that and the dog."

"I couldn't see why you made so much fuss about the dog!"

"I didn't see it for a long time — and then everything hitched together, with a sort of flash. The dog hadn't been there when the midget first got in the room, he was brought into the bedroom by the valet when the Mirkos returned. And he stopped our little murderer from getting away by the bedroom window — his friends must have been ready to catch him in a blanket or something. Your men wouldn't have found them, except by great luck; they were too small.

"Well, after the murder, the midget made for the bedroom and the dog jumped at him — there are paw marks on the bedroom door. He couldn't get to the window — the

dog wouldn't let him — so he scuttled back to the wardrobe, climbed up the overcoat, and stowed away in the hatbox. The dog found his master's body and stopped to whine at it; then he turned back to the midget, who had shut the wardrobe doors from the inside and was safe. But the dog kept barking — and the next minute or so, the princess came back and heard him. Then — you know the rest."

Lang smiled a trifle dubiously. "And I used to have a fairly good conceit of my own reasoning powers," he said somberly. "Well — but there's just one more thing —"

"Yes?"

"For heaven's sake tell me how I gave myself away to you — on the big-game-hunter stuff. It passed everyone else."

Scarlet blushed to the tips of his ears. "Well, there had to be somebody like you guarding Prince Mirko," he said. "And you were the likeliest candidate — the rest were too old or too flabby. So I tried you on the murderee idea. Naturally, if you were what I thought you were, you'd run into more chances of being murdered than the rest of us. And you played up marvelously — but you couldn't help blinking for just a second. So then I asked you about Lipmann's gazelle — and when you said you'd shot a couple I knew, whatever you hunted, it wasn't African big-game!"

"But what the dickens is the matter with Lipmann's gazelle?" queried Lang heatedly. "Isn't it an animal you shoot? It sounded all right."

"Old man," said Scarlet a trifle sadly, "it isn't an animal at all, at least to my knowledge. I made it up that minute — out of my own little head!"

NEXT MONTH . . .

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE will contain the following stories, among others:

THE THIRD BULLET by *John Dickson Carr*

ALBERT PASTOR AT HOME by *Dashiell H. Hammett*

DEATH ON THE AIR by *Ngaio Marsh*

PORTRAIT OF ELEANOR

by MARJORIE ALAN

I'D HEARD about Gramercy from Madge Mayhew ever since I was so high. I knew about its beamed and paneled rooms; the oak stairway with treads so narrow that the foot must step sideways on them; the dim, windowless chamber huddled into the thickness of the great central chimney and reached only by a secret opening in the paneling, where once — tradition insisted — Charles the Second had spent a cramped and anxious afternoon while Roundhead soldiers scoured the woods around. I knew about the date — 1588 — and the one word GRAMERCY carved deep into the hearthstone, and the tale that some old seafarer of Elizabeth's day, home for good after that hazardous brush with Spain's Armada, had built him a house where he could look down the length of a wooded valley to the sea, and had given expression to his gratitude for life and liberty in the name he chose to call it by. Gramercy had been a treasured legend to me since childhood, and when Madge mentioned, on that gusty March afternoon, that Colonel Mayhew wanted to let it furnished if he could find a careful tenant, I looked at Bill and found him looking at me, as though somebody had dangled a slice of Heaven in front of us.

"We're pretty careful people," I said to Madge. "Do you think. . . ?" and saw her gray eyes warm suddenly to the idea.

"Why, Judy, of *course*," she said. "It'd be the very thing! Why didn't I think of it? Wait here while I telephone Uncle Bernard."

We waited, sitting one each side of the fire in her rather bleak little sitting-room, not daring even to speak to each other of the possibility, lest words should break the lovely dream. But the angel who deals with the prayers of homeless post-war newlyweds must have been in a kindly mood that afternoon, for Madge came back quite soon, smiling with satisfaction.

"It's all right," she said. "He hasn't let it yet, and I've told him you'll go and see it." She added, "It really is a nice old place and the garden's a joy." Her voice was wistful as she spoke, and I knew she was coveting that garden for her Andrew who had come back from the war minus an arm and with one lung refusing to do any of the things that it should. With a delicate husband, two school-age children, and very little money, Madge was finding life an uphill business, though she would never have admitted it. Colonel Mayhew, the owner of Gramercy, was Andrew's uncle, and I think he would have helped them through those not-too-easy times, but Andrew was too proud to accept charity, even from a relative and one as

wealthy as Colonel Mayhew. "Stephen sucks up to him," had been his final verdict the only time he and Madge had discussed the matter, "and I'm damned if I'll follow in Cousin Stephen's footsteps!" Between the two nephews who were Colonel Mayhew's only living relatives, little love had ever been lost.

I asked Madge, "Do you think we could go along and see the house right away?" and she said, "Why not?" and added, twinkling a little, "As a matter of fact, I told Uncle Bernard to expect you in about an hour!"

As we were packing ourselves into the car Bill asked her, "Why does he want to let the house? I thought he was only just home from the Middle East."

"He is," she said, "but the place has unhappy memories for him. His only daughter died there in rather tragic circumstances last year while he was still abroad. I think he feels he just can't bear to live there for a while, and Stephen and Anna agree with him.

"Anna?" I queried. The name was new to me.

She stood back as Bill switched on the engine. "Eleanor's companion. She married Stephen soon after Eleanor died, and they live with the old man to keep him company."

And then we were on our way.

That old Elizabethan who built Gramercy out of his heart's gratitude built well. Fashioned of mellowed brick, and oak-timbered, set among tranquil lawns and borders of roses and lavender, sheltered on the east by a copse of oak and beech, and looking down a magnificent valley to open sea beyond, it was a small but lovely jewel in a perfect setting.

Colonel Mayhew showed us round, and for the first time I saw the rooms which I had heard about as a child, walked up the narrow stairs, was shown the simple but effective device which screened the entrance to the Chimney Corner, as they called the hidden room. Not until we had seen the rest of the house did he take us into the library, where a log fire was blazing.

It was a room about eighteen feet square, running from front to back of the house, with a bay window looking towards the sea, and a great open fireplace, to the left of which a smaller, circular window gave a colorful glimpse of garden.

Colonel Mayhew saw me looking at it. "The one alteration I made to the house," he told me smiling. "I enjoy sitting here in the evening and watching the shadow of that oak spread across the grass."

"I shall enjoy it too," I said impulsively. "That is," I added, "if you'll let us rent the house."

"I hope you will," he said gravely. "It'll be safe with you. You'll keep the place happy." He glanced up at a huge, heavily-framed portrait above the fireplace. "It was to have belonged to my daughter," he said.

The fire had dulled to a red glow; the room was tranquil with the passive

expectancy of evening. I took a step or two forward to see the portrait more clearly, and Colonel Mayhew, moving beside me, lighted four candles that were set in a pair of branching silver sconces on the wide mantelpiece beneath it. It was by their kindly light that I had my first clear sight of Eleanor Mayhew.

Her father shifted one candlestick slightly so that the light fell fully on her face. "She had an accident when she was a child," he said, "and was never able to walk afterwards." He added, "My nephew Stephen painted that portrait for me only a few weeks before she died."

She was sitting in a wheel chair, wearing a dress of a deep, soft blue, out of which her neck rose white and slender to support a small head crowned with a coronet of smooth dark hair. A light silk rug was across her knees, falling in graceful folds to hide her feet, and beside the chair — actually, only part of one arm of it — was a shelf or narrow table of grained, polished wood on which were a miscellaneous assortment of things. I remember noticing vaguely that there were some books and several other things, but I paid very little attention to the table's contents the first time I saw the portrait. It was Eleanor's face that startled and held me. Meeting her eyes in the mild, unsteady candlelight, it was as though she reached out and gripped my shoulder. I only just stopped myself from saying soothingly, "Yes, my dear, what is it?" Instead I said futilely to Colonel Mayhew, "She was very young."

"Nineteen," he said. "She never reached her twentieth birthday," and then, from the abrupt movement of his head, I realized that someone else had come into the room. "My nephew, Dr. Stephen Dale," he said, and I found myself shaking hands with a tall, thin-faced man whose lips looked as if they would crack if he smiled.

"I see you are examining my portrait of my cousin," he said. And as Colonel Mayhew moved away to speak to Bill, he added, "Her dying as she did broke up my uncle badly."

I looked up at the portrait, and Eleanor looked down at me. "How did she die?" I asked.

He seemed to hesitate for a moment. "My uncle may have told you that she was never able to walk since she was quite small. While he was abroad her old nurse Debbie, whom she idolized, died suddenly and the shock of it unbalanced her brain. We found her lying on the terrace early one morning; she must have tried to get from her bed to the window seat and fallen. It was a terrible tragedy, particularly as my uncle was on the point of coming home. My wife and I do all we can for him, but I'm afraid he'll never get over it. That's the main reason why we want to leave this house for a while."

One of the candles flickered, and he crossed the room and switched on the electric light. "My uncle lives mentally in the middle ages," he said, and his thin lips stretched into something approaching a smile. "The house

really *is* quite civilized." In the radiance of electricity the four candles burned bravely and uselessly. Dr. Dale bent forward and blew them out, one after another, and from each as he extinguished it there rose a thin, slow spiral of smoke. I remember I was thinking that they looked like incense rising briefly to Eleanor when the door opened and a woman came into the room. She was very beautifully dressed in severe black that showed off the slim suppleness of her figure and the almost childlike fairness of her skin. She carried herself well and she knew how to walk — which so few women do today — but she had the coldest, most pitiless eyes of anyone I'd ever seen.

Dr. Dale introduced her to me: "My wife . . ." and I remembered Madge's words: "*Ann . . . Eleanor's companion. She married Stephen soon after Eleanor died.*" Involuntarily I glanced from that cold, remote, and lovely face to Eleanor's painted features, and once again it was as though the Eleanor of the portrait reached out and gripped me by the arm.

Bill and I moved into Gramercy three weeks later, on an April day of sun and shadow, rain and rainbow. The days were still cold although the month was more than half spent, and of an evening we were thankful enough to draw our chairs up to the library's log fire with the leaping flames teasing the shadows and Eleanor looking down on us from her great gilt frame. Even as early as that I was always acutely aware of her whenever I went into the library, but it wasn't until we had lived in Gramercy for nearly a month that it occurred to me to wonder what had been in her mind as she sat for her portrait.

A trivial enough incident put that query into my mind. Bill's father came to spend the day with us one Sunday. The old man has always been a keen amateur photographer and he spent the morning taking photographs of the house and the garden from every obscure angle he could think of, until finally, just as I was dishing up lunch, he called me to come out into the garden and be taken — "to finish up the spool." I shed my apron and came, but the result, when he sent it to us, was pretty grim.

"The Soul's Awakening, gone a trifle sour!" said Bill pleasantly.

"I wonder I didn't have flames spouting out of my ears," I retorted "Just as he was taking it I remembered that I'd left the cat loose in the kitchen with the cold chicken!"

We were in the library at the time, and as I spoke I glanced up and met Eleanor's eyes. Again it seemed to me that there was a desperate appeal in them, and with that photograph and the incident of the cat and the cold chicken in the forefront of my mind, it occurred to me to wonder what she could have been thinking about, while Stephen painted her.

I said something of the sort to Bill, who wasn't particularly interested.

"She went batty before she died,

didn't she? She looks a bit batty there. If it's going to upset you we'll have the portrait down."

But it didn't upset me. It interested me; it piqued me; in some queer way it pulled me, though I didn't know towards what.

And I didn't find out until Madge came to Gramercy at the end of June.

I hadn't seen her since that March afternoon when she first told us that Gramercy was to let. She was looking tired and worried: Andrew, I gathered, was working much too hard, and one of her boys, away at boarding school, was ailing. We spent most of the afternoon in the garden, and I was pleased to see that as time went on, Gramercy's peace and beauty were smoothing some of the strain and anxiety from her face. I had meant to give her tea on the lawn, but the fickleness of an English summer drove us indoors, and although the sun came out again later, the grass was too wet for us to remain in the garden. Instead, we sat in the library, and I curled up in Colonel Mayhew's chair and watched, through his small circular window, the shadow of the old oak lengthening slowly across the grass, as he had loved to do. The evening sun, coming levelly through the bay window, pitched a sharp dagger of light into the room and lifted into high relief an oblong patch of Eleanor's portrait — the table of her chair with its odd miscellany of objects. I had noticed them before, but this time, lying idly back in the chair where Colonel Mayhew had always sat of an evening, I really considered them. A gold paper crown, such as a child might have painted and cut out to while away a rainy afternoon, with a daisy chain twisted through it, standing on a brown leather-bound book. A child's gold bangle made like a serpent with brilliant emerald eyes. The cracked lid of one of those china honey-pots in the shape of a bee-hive, with an outsize bee for a handle, standing on another book — a black one this time, heavily tooled. And behind them, a little apart, but clearly visible as Stephen had painted it, a small, slim, silver clock with its hands pointing to a quarter-past four. They seemed an odd and rather pathetic assortment of things for Eleanor to have gathered about her: treasures, I guessed, from her childhood that her failing brain had turned to for consolation.

Madge saw me looking at them and her eyes followed mine. "I don't know what Stephen's like as a doctor," she said, "but at least he can paint. I never can understand how Uncle Bernard could endure to have that portrait there. It's so exactly like poor Eleanor, and so . . . somehow . . . disturbing. I suppose as he asked particularly for it to be done he hasn't liked to put it away."

My mind was on the crown and the china bee and the bracelet that must have been too small for a nineteen-year-old wrist — all of them lifted into temporary prominence by the fitful evening sunlight. I said, "She must have been very lonely."

"Yes," Madge agreed. "I'm afraid she must. After Debbie the nurse died . . ." She lifted her eyes again to the portrait. "That bee thing," she said, "was part of a present she gave Debbie when she was a little mite. She discovered that the name Deborah means a bee in some language — Hebrew, I believe. It was a great joke between them when Eleanor was small. She must have gone on treasuring all that was left of it because it had belonged to Debbie."

I thought of Anna's cold, chiseled beauty and Dr. Stephen of the thin lips. Poor Eleanor with only her china bee for comfort and companionship! I wondered what was the history of the paper crown and the bracelet. And why the daisy chain? Probably the books were some that Debbie had read to her as a child, though they didn't look like a child's books. They looked peculiarly heavy, solid tomes: I began to wonder what they were . . .

The library at Gramercy has built-in bookshelves reaching from floor to ceiling on two of its walls. While Madge talked of Eleanor's childhood, I let my eyes wander along the lines of books, seeking the two which were in the portrait. I found the black one after a few minutes' search, and got up to take it down from its shelf. Madge watched me, rather in surprise, as I opened it. It was a copy of the first five books of the Old Testament, printed in the Seventeenth Century, giving the text alternately in Hebrew and English; certainly not a book to attract a child.

"What's that?" Madge asked.

I read, with some difficulty, from the title page. "The books of the Pentateuch in Hebrew —" And then I stopped. The name Deborah, Madge had just said, meant a bee in Hebrew, and Eleanor had balanced a china representation of a bee on a book which was printed partly in the Hebrew language. Standing there, with that ancient, well-worn volume in my hands I got my first vague — very vague — clue to what had been in Eleanor's mind while she sat for her portrait.

It didn't come to me in a flash or anything like it. At first I only thought that she must have been consoling herself by associating a china bee with the Hebrew language to make Debbie seem nearer to her, or something of the sort. It wasn't until Madge's rather soft voice enquired, "What's the other book?" that I went on to the next stage.

The other book was more difficult to find. It had a heavy brown leather binding, with gold tooling round the edge, but so had many of Colonel Mayhew's books. Moreover it was on the very top shelf, near the door. It was Madge who finally located it, and I had to climb the little oak library staircase to reach it.

As I came down with it in my hands —

"Why, it's a Greek lexicon," Madge exclaimed in surprise. "What did Eleanor want with a lexicon?"

If a bee standing on a Hebrew testament meant Deborah — *if* it did! —

what did a painted gold paper crown with a daisy chain wound through it mean in Greek? It sounded like some absurd and impossible riddle without sense or reason. But Eleanor's eyes were on me as I stood holding the lexicon, and the urgency in them was unmistakable — almost as though Eleanor herself was imploring me not to give up so soon . . .

Madge looked at me in silence when I put the query into words. Then she said quietly, "Well, let's see if we can find out."

But the lexicon was only Greek-into-English, and neither of us knew what we were looking for. After the minutes we were completely fogged among strange symbols which had no meaning for us. It was while we were searching the shelves for some book that would give us the Greek for "crown" that we stumbled upon the Dictionary of Names. An old book it was — Colonel Mayhew loved old books — clumsily bound and printed in old-fashioned, uneven type, and it claimed to give the meaning of every Christian name known.

Madge paused in front of it. "That must be where Eleanor discovered that Deborah meant a bee."

"Fetch it down," I said. Following along the same line of thought, it seemed at least possible that the crown also represented a proper name.

Madge took the book from the shelf and opened it at "A." "She had a kitten called Angelina which she adored when she was small," she said. "We shall probably find that it's meant for Angelina."

But it wasn't. Angelina, said the dictionary, meant "lovely" or "angelic": by no stretch of imagination could it be made to mean a paper crown with a daisy chain twisted through it. I began to wonder if we had embarked on a wild goose chase. But Angelina was on the same page as Anna, and the thought of Stephen's wife set me turning over the pages to the "Ss".

The dictionary was perfectly definite and concise. "*Stephen. A crown or garland.*"

Madge was staring down at it frowningly, one lip caught between her teeth. "Debbie . . . and Stephen . . . That can't be a coincidence. Was it a game, do you suppose? And if so, who are the other things meant to represent — the bracelet and the clock?"

A cloud moved suddenly across the sun, and Eleanor's carefully arranged display fell back once more into shadowed obscurity. But Eleanor's face was still clear and distinct in the evening light, and whatever had been in Eleanor's mind while that portrait was being painted, I was very sure it was not a game. It was deadly serious.

I said so to Madge. "I believe she put those things beside her with some definite purpose. They mean something, and she wanted someone to know it. Someone," I said slowly, groping my way inch by slow inch towards the truth, "who was going to see that portrait. Her father, of course: it was painted for him. Yes,

that's it — a message for Colonel Mayhew. That's why she's looking like that — wondering if he's going to understand. . . ."

Madge said quickly, "But Judy, that's absurd. She . . . she went out of her mind at the end, you know. After Debbie died."

"She wasn't out of her mind when that portrait was painted," I said flatly. "She was just worried. Terribly, desperately worried. Look at her eyes. They're as sane as yours or mine. They're so sane that she's managed to put her whole soul into them, willing us to understand."

"'Us'?"

"Her father, then." A sudden thought struck me. "Did she know it was to be hung there?"

Madge hesitated. "I don't know. Yes, probably she did; he'd always wanted a portrait of her there."

"Then I believe she arranged those things deliberately in that position so that they would be lighted up when he sat in his usual chair every summer evening — as they were tonight. Only he wasn't here: he never has been here on a summer evening to see them. There was something," I said again to Madge, groping . . . groping . . . groping after the truth, "that Eleanor desperately wanted him to know about Debbie and Stephen, and that was the only way she could tell him."

Outside it started suddenly to rain again — warm, gentle, summer rain. In the twilit, shadowed room I suddenly saw clearly.

"*Because,*" I went on a little breathlessly, "*she knew she wouldn't be here to tell him herself.*"

Madge made a small, strangled noise, one slim hand to her throat. "Judy — *stop!* It's all the craziest guess work! There isn't a word of truth in any of it! Eleanor wasn't *ill,* you know, except in her mind right at the end. She couldn't have known beforehand that she was going to die. She . . . she fell from her bedroom window early one morning . . ."

Stephen who looked cold and ruthless and devoid of affection or pity. Debbie who had died. A gold bracelet in the shape of a serpent. A little silver clock . . .

"Or was she pushed?" I said.

I can still see Madge's face as she looked at that moment. Startled, shocked, incredulous — and yet with a dawning doubt and horror in her eyes, in case it could be true.

"Stephen . . ." she began; and changed the direction of her thoughts. "Anna . . ."

"They married," I reminded her, "soon after Eleanor died."

She shook her head. "We're talking nonsense, Judy. *Dangerous* nonsense. Why should Stephen murder Eleanor?" And then her eyes, racing ahead of her tongue, looked round the gracious room and out of the window to the garden's rain-washed evening sweetness, and there came to me an echo of Colonel Mayhew's voice on our first visit: "*It was to have belonged to my daughter.*"

"Where's Colonel Mayhew staying

now?" I asked her.

"He's with Stephen and Anna in London. He . . . he isn't very well. I don't want to worry him."

"In that case," I said, "we'd better try and read the rest of the message ourselves. What do you suppose the bracelet means?"

It seemed to me that Madge dragged her mind back to the question from somewhere very far away. I suppose it was the very urgency of my own conviction and will that forced her to apply her mind to the riddle: certainly she had no real belief herself then that I was talking sense.

"I remember her wearing it as a child," she said abstractedly. "Andrew's mother gave it to her one birthday. It's a hideous thing."

I turned back to the Dictionary of Names, and after a moment or two Madge came to read it over my shoulder. There were a wolf and a dog and a raven and a lion and a dove. There were a lamb and a gazelle and a weasel. But apparently no name then known to the English tongue meant a snake.

We were still poring over the dictionary when Bill came home.

He opened the library door and switched on the light. "What goes on? And why the dim light?" he demanded. He greeted Madge, asked after Andrew and the boys, and then turned to look, with some amusement, at our scattered array of books. "And why the sudden thirst for knowledge?"

"We're trying to find out what a snake could stand for," I told him, my mind still on the search.

"Poison," said Bill promptly. "Any child knows that. 'Ye spotted snakes with double tongue —' " And broke off at the look on our faces.

We argued about it for the rest of the evening. Bill said at once and definitely that it was all nonsense. I knew I was right. And Madge remained unconvinced — at least, to begin with.

"This Deborah," said Bill, taking charge of the discussion. "When did she die?"

"In April of last year," Madge said.

"How? An illness?"

"She got a cold and it turned to pneumonia."

"Do you know what doctor attended her?"

"Stephen, I suppose. He's a qualified doctor though he doesn't practise now. That's why Uncle Bernard left Eleanor in his care."

"And Anna?"

"Anna came a few months earlier, to be Eleanor's companion. Stephen found her."

"They married," I said stubbornly. "They're living with Colonel Mayhew in the home that was to be Eleanor's. They'll inherit his money and this house when he dies." It all added up to such obvious, incontrovertible sense. And suddenly I knew that it wasn't completed even yet — *because Colonel Mayhew wasn't well.* Madge had said so, only a few minutes before.

It was that, I think, that shocked her into final belief. Also, if we were

right, it meant that we were not only trying to solve a murder but to prevent one. Time became suddenly all-important.

"You'll never convince Uncle Bernard," Madge said, "without concrete proof. He thinks the world of Stephen."

"Then we must produce the proof," I said, and I remember that even in those first few minutes I never had any doubt that we could do so. I looked up at Eleanor, leaning back in her chair with her tragic, gallant message arrayed like a banner beside her — the bee and the snake and the crown-garland — watching Stephen paint them, knowing that the artist in him would portray them faithfully; looking back on Deborah's death and forward to her own and, unable to escape because of her infirmity, fighting her murderers with the precarious, uncertain weapon which was all she had — a cryptic message which it was long odds against anybody understanding. That and her own undefeated spirit, which also Stephen had portrayed, so that to anyone who looked at her picture with sympathy and discernment it was as though she cried out to them to take heed.

"*Stephen . . . poisoned . . . Deborah.*"

How had she found out? The brain that planned that message and set it where it would be lifted into prominence each evening before her father's eyes must have known that the message alone was of little use. If Madge realized that Colonel Mayhew would demand concrete proof, how much more clearly must Eleanor have known it.

"There's still the clock," I said. "That's your proof."

Madge frowned a little and Bill asked bluntly, "What do you mean?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what it means or how it provides the proof we need — I only know it does. She was very wise."

Bill looked at me for a moment in indecision. Then he turned to Madge.

"What do you know about the clock?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Not a single thing. I don't remember even seeing it. I wonder if it's still in the house. If Judy's right . . ."

We began our search in the library itself, though I was certain it wasn't there. We worked through the house, room by room, opening cupboards and cabinets and searching in any place where a small object might have been put away. In the room that had been Eleanor's bedroom — a tranquil, sunny room with a wide bay window and a deep-cushioned window seat — we searched with special care, but still without result.

It was Madge who finally discovered it, stowed away in a cupboard in a tiny bedroom which we never used. We took it down to the library, put it on the mantelpiece beneath Eleanor's portrait, and set about trying to wrest its secret from it. It was an ordinary enough little traveling clock, flat and square and silver, tarnished with neglect, and obviously

broken. It still said quarter past four, but had nothing further to tell us that we could understand.

"A clock," said Bill at last, "puts the emphasis on time. Four-fifteen in this case. Why four-fifteen? Tea time, presumably. What else?"

None of us could answer that. Tea time . . . a table set under the oak in summer; muffins round the fire in winter: a homely hour, far removed from poison and untimely death.

"Four-fifteen *a*.m.?" Madge suggested.

Sleepless nights . . . summer dawns breaking. . . . But no apparent connection with Debbie or Stephen.

And so on — round and round, racking our brains and finding neither rhyme nor reason.

After a while Bill took an envelope from his pocket and wrote the figures on the back of it:

4 — 15

Madge and I watched him, and the figures stared derisively back at us, meaningless and bald.

"It could be a date," Bill said thoughtfully. "Does the fifteenth of April suggest anything to you?"

Madge hesitated. "Debbie died in April — I'm not sure of the date. But even if it *was* the fifteenth, that isn't proof. A link, perhaps with the other things, but not . . . not proof."

"How ill is Colonel Mayhew?" I asked.

She turned to me. "Not very seriously, I think. He wrote that he had eaten something that had disagreed with him, but that Stephen was treating him and he hoped to be all right in a day or two."

Something that had disagreed with him! And Stephen was treating him! It had an ominous sound. I saw from the others' faces that the same grim thought was in their minds as well.

"You must talk to him," I said to Madge. "Telephone him or go and see him right away. Make what excuse you like and tell him as much or as little as you and Andrew think wise. But find out what he knows about that clock — or what he associates with the time four-fifteen. Ask him where the clock came from . . . what it reminds him of . . . whose it was. Get out of him every single thing he can think of to tell you about it — or about that particular time. Make him really *think* about it. After all, the message was to *him* — the key must be in *his* mind."

Madge left soon after, and Bill and I went up to bed, and I remember I couldn't sleep. I lay awake most of that night, thinking of Eleanor and Debbie and Stephen and Anna; thinking too of Madge and her Andrew who would be Colonel Mayhew's heir if anything should happen to Stephen. I liked the idea of Madge and Andrew and their boys coming to live at Gramercy with Colonel Mayhew: Madge's steady warm-heartedness, I thought, would comfort and uphold him, and in the gracious old house and the loveliness of its surroundings Andrew might regain some of the health

and serenity that he had forfeited on Dunkirk beach.

I wondered when we should hear from Madge.

We hadn't long to wait. She came over the next morning and Andrew came with her, because it was Saturday and he was at home. Andrew bore no resemblance either to his uncle or his cousin. He was a fair, quiet man, tall and broadly built, with alert blue eyes and a slow, rather shy smile.

Madge, I gathered, had telephoned Colonel Mayhew that morning.

"He said he was feeling a little better," she told us, 'and that Stephen was looking after him splendidly. I asked him about the clock, and he said at once, 'It's in Stephen's portrait of Eleanor.' That was all he could remember about it at first, except that it belonged to Eleanor and used to stand on the nursery mantelpiece when she was a child. He didn't know where it had come from in the first place; he didn't know what had become of it now. And the time four-fifteen hadn't any particular association for him. I'm afraid," said Madge thoughtfully, "he began to think I was a bit mental when I went on nagging him about it. I told him it was important, though I didn't, of course, tell him why on the telephone, but we drew an absolute blank all round, and I was just going to ring off when he suddenly remembered that the clock had been connected with an incident in Eleanor's childhood."

"Yes?" I said.

Madge hesitated. "It's a long time ago . . . and a very small thing, really. But it does concern that clock, and it's just possible . . . Anyway, here it is for what it's worth. When Eleanor was small, Debbie used to punish her when she'd been naughty by making her stand in the corner of the nursery. One afternoon when she was about five years old she had an irresistible urge to decorate the landing walls with crayon drawings. I don't know where Debbie could have been, but she was evidently well out of the way, because Eleanor indulged her artistic talent to the full, and then, apparently feeling a bit dubious about the result, she decided to anticipate Debbie's obvious reaction by getting right on with the punishment. She went and stood in the corner faithfully for a quarter of an hour, which was the average time decreed by Debbie for middling-bad naughtiness, and because it was always a point of honor that she shouldn't turn round while she was there, she put that clock on the window sill where she could just see it out of the corner of her eye without turning her head."

"I don't see —" I began.

Madge held up a hand. "Wait a moment. That isn't quite all. When she'd stood there for her allotted fifteen minutes she went to put the clock back on the mantelpiece, but somehow she dropped it and it slipped down between the wall and the window seat: the house is so old that the wall's crooked just there and in one place there's quite a gap between the wall and the seat. You don't notice it

normally because the cushions hide it, but once Eleanor had dropped the clock no one could get it up without taking away part of the window seat, and she was in disgrace all over again. That's the incident as Uncle Bernard told it to me on the telephone just now. It may mean nothing at all — it's nearly fifteen years since it happened — but it may — it just *may* — mean that Eleanor was trying to remind her father of a perfectly safe and unknown hiding place in the old nursery which later became her bedroom."

There was silence for a moment as Madge stopped speaking. Then Bill asked abruptly, "Well, what are we waiting for?" and turned towards the door.

I remember that on the way upstairs none of us found anything to say. Bill went up first, taking the stairs two at a time; then Madge and I; then Andrew. In the room that had been Eleanor's bedroom when she grew too old to need a nursery, Bill pulled the fitted cushions off the window seat and threw them aside, revealing the plain wooden seat below. The wall, like the walls of so many Elizabethan houses, bulged here and there, and in one place just underneath the window there was quite a wide gap, as Colonel Mayhew had said, between the wall and the seat.

"See if you can get your hand down, Judy," said Bill.

I tried, but although I could slide my fingers straight down beside the wall, the hole was too narrow for me to turn my wrist, and Madge, when she tried, had no better success, although her hand was smaller.

"There's something down there," she declared, withdrawing her hand. "I can feel it, but I can't get hold of it."

"We need a saw," said Bill briefly, and went to fetch one.

There were marks, plain to see, where a piece of the wooden seat had been sawn away to retrieve the clock and later replaced. Now, nearly fifteen years later, Bill sawed away the same piece of wood while the rest of us stood and watched him, wondering what we were going to find. It seemed an age until he lifted out an oblong slab of wood and reached down into the hole he had made: I remember wondering as I waited whether Eleanor knew what was happening, and hoping that she did.

It was a tin that Bill drew up — a plain, flat, narrow tin that might once have held sweets or biscuits. He stood with it in his hand, looking down at it thoughtfully; then, still holding it firmly, he eased off its lid.

A moment later we were all staring at a medicine bottle, half full of a clear, pink liquid, packed carefully into a nest of crumpled tissue paper.

A scrap of paper had been wrapped round it and tied on with a length of brown darning wool. Bill took the bottle from its nest — holding it carefully in a handkerchief, careful not to touch it with bare fingers — and

severed the wool with his knife.

"That's Eleanor's writing," said Andrew, as he unrolled the paper.

The message was necessarily brief, on account of the small space, but it was commendably clear.

Remains of medicine given to Deborah Parsons by Dr. Stephen Dale during her last illness. I believe it to be poisoned.

It was signed with her name — *Eleanor Mayhew* — and the date: *April 15th, 1945.*

For a long moment none of us spoke. Then Madge said slowly, "We can get it analyzed. If it *is* poisoned . . . do you suppose it's enough proof?"

I looked at Eleanor's note. "It should be proof enough to convince her father," I said, "and that's what matters most at the present moment."

Madge voiced the obviously weak link in our case. "He may think it was . . . because her wits were wandering."

"*Was* she mad?" Bill asked.

Madge looked at Andrew.

"We've only got Stephen's word for it," Andrew said, "and in view of all this, Stephen's word may not be particularly trustworthy. It would have been very easy for him and Anna to keep her virtually a prisoner . . . intercept her letters to her father . . . spread abroad the report that her mind was affected. She couldn't move from her chair, and there was no one else here to help her."

"Old Mother Briggs," I suggested. "Only she's deaf. And pretty dumb as well."

Madge's eyebrows lifted a trifle. "Mother Briggs?"

"She used to 'come mornings to oblige the doctor.' Now she comes mornings to oblige us."

"She would have been someone for Eleanor to turn to for help, then."

"She's deaf," I said again. "Stone deaf. You have to simply yell at her to make her hear anything, and Anna and Stephen would have been around all the time. And she can't read."

Andrew's steady eyes were on my face. "So what it boils down to is that Eleanor was probably sane but helpless, and in the power of those devils." He turned to Bill. "If this stuff" — he pointed to the medicine — "*does* contain poison, would a jury convict on the strength of it?"

Bill laid the bottle and the note down on the table. "If it's got Stephen's fingerprints on it," he said, "I don't see why not. I suppose there's not much doubt that he was responsible for Eleanor's death as well — he and his wife between them. But I doubt if we could ever pin it on them. Was this the window she fell from?"

"Yes," said Madge.

"Wait a minute," said Andrew slowly. "What was she doing at the window so early in the morning? Granted Stephen may have pushed her out — which is what we all suspect — why was she there to be pushed? She'd managed somehow to get from the bed to the window seat, which couldn't have been an easy

thing for her to do. *Why*? And why did Stephen change his tactics? He'd got away with poison once. He's evidently getting ready to try it again now. They say once a poisoner always a poisoner. Yet with Eleanor he took a far greater risk. I mean — this window isn't a very great height above the ground. Suppose the fall hadn't killed her? Suppose she'd lived . . . even a few minutes . . . to tell what had happened? It doesn't make sense."

"What do you mean?" Madge asked Andrew.

"Only this: suppose her death *was* an accident after all. Suppose she was trying to get to her hiding place before anyone else was awake."

Madge's eyes went to the broken window seat. "But she couldn't have taken the tin out. *I* couldn't reach it. Nor could Judy."

"No," Andrew agreed. "She couldn't have taken the tin out. But she might have been trying to put something else in."

Bill shook his head. "There's nothing else there. Look for yourself."

Andrew looked at Madge. "Who was it found her?"

"I always imagined Stephen did, but I don't think I ever really heard."

"Old Mother Briggs might know," I suggested. "She's downstairs now. Shall I ask her?"

"Call her up here, Judy," Andrew said. "I'd like to ask her some questions."

I ran downstairs, past the hall window that framed a tranquil picture of roses and still green branches and a serene June sky; past the open door of the library that gave me a brief glimpse of Eleanor watching with anxious eyes. . . .

The kitchen was hot and disorderly and noisy with the clatter of crockery. Pastry board and rolling pin and a scattered dusting of flour over everything argued pastry recently in the making, and in the midst of this chaos stood Mrs. Briggs.

I had to yell at her before I could make her understand what I wanted, and then she came with marked reluctance, pausing to pull down her sleeves, and grumbling at the interruption because her pastry was "in." She stumped upstairs behind me, wiping floury hands on the vast apron, and stood in the doorway, foursquare and glum, oozing noncollaboration.

Andrew said pleasantly, "Good morning, Mrs. Briggs. I believe you were here when Miss Eleanor died?"

She stared at him with the stony blankness of the very deaf. "Eh?"

He repeated it fortissimo.

A little shower of flour scattered from her apron to the floor as she folded her arms. "In a manner o' speakin', yes, and again in a manner o' speakin', no."

"How do you mean?"

Her expression suggested that though her Christian duty was to suffer fools, she saw no reason to do so gladly. "It was me as found 'er a-lyin' there w'en I come in at eight o'clock, an' a 'orrible shock it was wot I ain't got over yet nor never shall. Dead for nigh on two hours she'd been then,

the doctor 'e says w'en 'e sees 'er, so if it's about the time she *died* as you're wantin' to know, I can't tell you nothin', not bein' there till two hours afterwards, though punctual on the dot that mornin' as I am *hevery* mornin' o' me life!" The glare she flung in my direction dared me to find any fault with that assertion.

"But you did see her," Andrew persisted, "as she lay on the terrace?"

"You're right it give me the terrors! There wasn't a night for a week wot I didn't dream of it, an' still do."

Andrew tried again. "You — did — see — her — lying — out — there?" He pointed to the window.

"That's wot I'm a-tellin' you," said Mrs. Briggs flatly.

"Was she . . . was there anything in her hand?"

"Only a bit of ivy off the 'ouse wot she must 'a clutched at, falling, poor thing."

"And you didn't find anything down there on the terrace that she might have dropped as she fell?"

"Like wot?"

"Anything. Something fairly small. A piece of paper, for instance."

Mrs. Briggs shook a positive head. "Nought o' that kind. No paper there wasn't. Just a bit of ivy."

We seemed to be reaching a dead end. I glanced at Andrew, my lips already opened to dismiss the old woman. There was a faint frown on his face.

"Is there a gardener?" he asked.

I think he meant the question for Bill, but for some obscure reason Mrs. Briggs heard it and answered it. "Not now there ain't. But old Jim Calder come in reg'lar in the doctor's time until 'is screws got so bad 'e couldn't work."

"How long ago did he leave?"

She took a minute to think about that. "Christmas time it must 'a bin, 'cos the day 'e went 'e give me a little tin world wot 'e'd just picked up on the rockery down there." Her hand jerked towards the window. " 'There y'are, me ole dear,' 'e says ter me, 'I'm a-givin' you the world fer a Christmas box.' A rare one for a joke was Jim."

Andrew queried, "A little tin world?"

She nodded. "'S'right. With a 'ole in where you puts pencils in to sharpen 'em. Only it won't work no more along of a great dent in it."

"And he found it on the terrace this last Christmas? Since Miss Eleanor's death?"

"Eh?"

Andrew skipped that one. "Where is it now?"

She looked vaguely round the room. "Don't know as I could rightly tell you, not now. I seem ter recall puttin' it on the kitchen dresser when it wouldn't work, but 'tain't there now."

"Go and look for it," I yelled. "I'll come with you."

She looked at me with sour disapproval. "The pastry's in."

"Let it burn," I said recklessly, and I propelled her out of the room and down the stairs.

Into the muddled kitchen we plunged — all four of us, and Mrs. Briggs whose mind, as well as her oven, was filled with pastry. No old-time explorer ever put into his search for a new world one quarter of the urgency with which we hunted for that dented tin globe. It wasn't on the dresser, nor in any of the dresser cupboards. It wasn't in the table drawer. It wasn't anywhere. We turned the kitchen inside out, to Mrs. Briggs' exasperation and perplexity, but without result. We got hotter and hotter and Mrs. Briggs got crosser and crosser, and when Bill knocked over the cracked pottery vase in which she kept her spills I started to curse him for a clumsy lout, and was brought to a halt by the sudden, imperative pressure of Madge's hand on my arm. Broken pottery scattered over the tiled floor and spills flew everywhere, but among them rolled a small tin pencil sharpener made like a globe, and dented all out of shape.

Mrs. Briggs turned from the sink at the sound of the crash.

"I'll be pleased," she told me with feeling, "if you'll see fit to take a week's notice as from today. I'm not used to 'avin' me kitchen messed up with a lot o' parlor tricks and I don't take kindly to it at my time o' life." She stooped for the pencil sharpener and put it into Bill's hands. "If this is wot you're after, there it is, and plenty like it to be bought at Woolworth's without breakin' up a body's 'ouse and 'ome, an' I'll thank you to take it away now you've got it."

We took it away. We took it into the library and we set it on the table there for Eleanor to see.

"It opens," Andrew said. "You'll have to force it." And he and Madge and I watched while Bill inserted the point of his pocket knife beneath the misshapen tin and pried the two halves of it apart.

Inside were the thin shavings of many pencils — and a tiny twist of paper. The shavings fell out onto the table as Bill straightened out the paper and read its message aloud. Like the other, it was very brief.

Today they have begun poisoning my food. Eleanor Mayhew. June 8th, 1945.

Madge was looking over his shoulder. "June the eighth. She died on the ninth."

There was silence for a moment. Then —

"So that," said Andrew softly, "was what Eleanor hastened her death to tell us. *Today they have begun poisoning my food.* With his one hand he took the twist of paper from Bill and picked up the two battered halves of globe. "I'll need the other note and the medicine bottle as well," he said. "Get the car running, Madge, while I collect them — I've just about got time to catch the 1:45 to London. There's a bloke I used to know in the army," said Andrew grimly, "who's some sort of big noise at Scotland Yard. He asked me to look him up one day, and I've got a feeling the time's come to accept his invitation . . ."

It has often been said that you cannot mix pure detection with pure love — or, for that matter, pure detection with impure love. The dyed-in-the-blood detective-story fan, like the true scotch-drinker, wants his potion straight — it would be sacrilege to adulterate his favorite form of relaxation with, on the one hand, slick and sugary romance, and, on the other hand, similarly dilutive soda and water. Let love serve as motivation, and even then, insists the real aficionado, keep it properly in the background.

All this may or may not be true: obviously there are at least two schools of thought on the matter. Mignon G. Eberhart, for example, could hardly be expected to agree fully with John Dickson Carr on the ratiocinative role of romance, and the "blenders" or "middle-coursers" would not be likely to agree with either of them.

But how about the pure crime story — can that be based wholly on the theme of love?

To help you solve this delicate problem for yourself, we now offer a pair of love-and-crime stories. In both tales the threads of love and crime are so closely intertwined that any attempt to separate them would destroy the entire fabric. The first story was written by one of America's best-known magazine writers — Octavus Roy Cohen; the second story is the work of one of France's too-little-known writers — Maurice Level. Both are tales of tender and beautiful love — but with a difference. The American story ends on a high note of sentiment; the French story ends on a high note of bitter irony — a difference, we cannot help thinking, which is rather typical of the two literary viewpoints involved.

JOURNEY'S END

by OCTAVUS ROY COHEN

"You are not too late," said the grave and kindly physician, "but you understand, of course, that there is no hope. She may live half an hour. Perhaps two hours. No longer."

The young man was haggard. His clothes were travel-stained. "I have crossed the country — just to be with her," he explained. "Isn't there any chance? Has every possible effort been made?"

"Yes. . . . Even your presence will only mean that she will die happy. She is conscious: her brain is crystal clear. You — you would be happy to know how she has called for you — from the first."

The light in the sickroom was mercifully dim.

The young man entered softly and stood framed in the doorway. As though at a signal, the white-clad

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nurse nodded and padded from the room. The air was oppressive with the odor of liniments — tinctured somewhat by a profusion of flowers.

It had been a ghastly thing — this automobile smash-up which was ending the life of a beautiful young woman before it was well started.

Her voice — bright and glad and without a quiver — came to his ears: "Edward!"

He was on his knees by the bed, his arms about her frail form, his head pillowed on her breast. If his embrace gave her pain, she did not show it, for it was a pain glorified by love: it was a moment of supreme happiness of which she had abandoned hope. There had been a time — three years before — when he had gone bravely west . . . promising to return and marry her. Three spans of eternity. "Oh, Cicely," he cried brokenly, "I came as soon as I heard. I came —"

"To bid me good-by, sweetheart."

"No! Not that!"

"Yes, dear. In an hour — or two — or three. But, if you will, you can sit here with your hand in mine — or with your head — where it is. I never knew, dear, until recently how I have loved you: how I shall always love you — even afterward. You shall remain with me and your kiss of God-speed will make my journey's end a happy one."

Her flowerlike face twitched with pain.

"It is so different, my boy, from what we planned. You were coming back to marry me —"

His stricken eyes stared into hers. "I have come back to marry you. Please. . . . Right here! Now!"

Even in the half light of the curtained room he could see the expression of ineffable contentment which crossed her weary face. "You would really do that?"

"If you will let me."

"Oh, my darling! Only to know — even for a moment — that I am your wife."

He stepped from the sickroom and spoke hurriedly with the physician. Then he sat quietly by the bedside until the minister arrived with prayer book and license.

They did not speak — and if the eyes of the young man were misted with tears, those of the girl were starry.

And there, on the threshold of the hereafter, they were united in marriage.

Then they were alone — the bridegroom whose life lay glittering ahead; the bride who was about to die.

She would not let him explain why he had never before returned. The hour-glass of her life had nearly run its course, and she refused to mar her last precious moments by thought of anything save the perfect present.

It was as his wife that she was dying, and if there was an agony of regret that she had been denied the reality of wifehood . . . the knowledge that he was here, even for so brief a time, robbed her of all pain.

It was as though the gates of heaven had been opened to her even before

the Angel of Death touched her with his kindly, relieving wand.

Her voice dropped to a whisper as she bade him bend closer. Their lips clung for a moment, and then she took his head in her two hands and rested it on her breast. He could feel the fluttering of her heart — faint . . . fainter . . . then it was still and his sobs signaled those in the adjoining room that the end had come.

The minister dropped his arm across the shoulders of the young man and walked with him into another room.

"This is a house of death, my son — and of happiness."

"Yes. . . ." The young man was choked with tears. He turned pleadingly toward the minister who had performed the marriage ceremony. "Tell me," he questioned, "do you believe that there is ever an excuse for crime?"

"For crime, my son?"

"Yes. I have committed a crime. You see —" He nodded toward the room where lay the body of his wife. "She didn't ask me why I never returned. It was sufficient that I was here. And I couldn't tell her —"

The minister questioned gently.

"What is this crime you have committed?"

And the young man answered:

"Bigamy."

ALL SAINTS' DAY

by MAURICE LEVEL

DRAPED in a loose hospital wrap that made her seem even thinner than she was, the girl was standing lost in thought at the foot of her shiny white bed.

Her childish face was wasted, and her blue eyes, sad, fathomless, and circled with dark rings, were so unnaturally large they seemed to light up her whole face. Her cheeks burned with a hectic flush, and the deep lines that ran down to her mouth looked as if they had been worn there by the flow of unceasing tears.

She hung her head when the house-surgeon stopped beside her.

"Well, Little No. 4, what's this I hear? You want to go out?"

"Yes, sir . . ." The voice was hardly more than a whisper.

"But that's very foolish. . . . You've only been up two or three days. In weather like this, too. You'd certainly fall ill again. Wait a day or two. You're not unhappy here? . . . Has anyone been unkind to you?"

"No . . . oh, no, sir. . . ."

"What is it then?"

There was more energy in her tone as she said:

"I must go out."

And as if anticipating his question

From "Tales of Mystery and Horror" by Maurice Level. Copyright 1920 by Robert M. McBride & Co.

she continued quickly: "This is All Saints' Day. I promised to take some flowers to my sweetheart's grave. . . . I promised. . . . He has only me. . . . If I don't go, no one will. . . . I promised. . . ."

A tear shone under her eyelid. She wiped it away with a finger.

The house-surgeon was touched. And either out of curiosity, or so as not to seem awkward and leave her without some word of comfort, he asked:

"Is it long since he died?"

"Nearly a year . . ."

"What was the matter with him?"

She seemed to shrink, to become even more frail, her chest more hollow, her hands thinner as, her eyes half-closed, her lips trembling, she murmured:

"He was executed."

The house-surgeon bit his lip, saying in a low voice:

"Poor child . . . I'm very sorry. If you really must go out, go. . . . But take care not to catch cold. You must come back tomorrow."

Once outside the hospital gates, she began to shiver.

It was a dreary autumn morning. Moisture trickled down the walls. Everything was gray: the sky, the houses, the naked trees, and the misty distance where people hurried along anxious to get out of the damp streets.

It had been the middle of summer when she had fallen ill, and her dress was a brightly-hued one of thin cotton. The crumpled ribbon that encircled her wasted neck made her look even more pitiable. The skirt, blouse, and necktie might have smiled back at the sunshine, but in the chill gray setting they seemed to droop with sadness.

She started off with an uncertain walk, stopping every now and then because she was out of breath and her head swimming.

The people she passed turned to look after her. She seemed to hesitate as if wishing to speak to them, then afraid, walked on, glancing nervously from right to left. In this way she crossed half of Paris. She stopped when she came to the Quais, standing to watch the slow, muddy flow of the river. The piercing cold cut through her and feeling she could not bear much more, she started off again.

When she got to Place Maubert and the Avenue des Gobelins, she felt almost at home, for she was now in the neighborhood in which she had lived. Soon she began to see faces she knew, and she heard someone say as she passed:

"Surely that's Vandat's girl. . . . How she has changed!"

"Which Vandat?"

"Vandat the murd . . ."

She quickened her steps, pressing her hands against her face so as not to hear the end of the word.

It was getting dark when she at last arrived at the wretched little hotel where she had lodged before she fell ill. She went in. Street-girls and their men were playing cards in the little

café downstairs. When they saw her they called out:

"Hullo! Here's Blue Eyes" — for that used to be her nickname. "Come and have a drink, Blue Eyes. Here's a seat . . . come along. . . ."

Their welcome touched her, but the thick, rank smoke made her cough, and she could hardly breathe as she replied:

"No. . . . I've no time now. . . . Is Madame in?"

"Yes, there she is."

She smiled timidly at the manageress.

"I wanted to ask you, Madame, if I could get at my things. The clothes I have on aren't warm enough. . . ."

"Any clothes you left were taken up to the attic; they'll be there somewhere. I'll send someone to look for them. . . . Sit down by the stove and warm yourself."

"No. . . . I've no time now. I'll come back presently."

She went out, and the short stay in the stifling room made the cold outside seem more piercing than ever.

People were hurrying along laden with bead-wreaths and bouquets of flowers: some were in deep mourning and walked slowly and sadly; others, dressed in their best clothes, talked and laughed, and one saw at a glance that they were carrying their offerings to the cemetery as a matter of habit.

All along the side of the pavement barrows of flowers were drawn up. Chrysanthemums with curled petals drooped over clusters of roses; here and there mimosa shed its golden powder over bunches of violets.

Nearer to the cemetery, in front of the shops of the marble masons, pots of flowers were arranged on the shelves of stands, insignificant, with neat foliage and restrained colors; further on were immortelles and large bead-wreaths.

She looked at all this with eyes that glowed with envy. If only she could get some for him, just a little bunch . . . for him where he was lying at the far end of the cemetery in his poor, unconsecrated grave, a bare mound, without a single word to show that he was lying there.

"Murderer" . . . that meant nothing to her.

He was the being she adored, her Man, the lover who had possessed her whole soul. . . . In a moment of madness he had killed someone. . . . Had he not paid his horrible debt in full?

The day he had been arrested she had sworn never to have anything to do with any other man, never; to give up the life she had been leading, to work, to become an honest girl once more . . . to live in memories of him. . . .

She kept on looking at the flowers.

A seller held out a bunch of roses: "A bouquet? Some chrysanthemums then? Violets?"

She passed without replying, for she did not possess one sou.

Yet there was but one idea in her mind — flowers. She must have some flowers. . . . She must get some flowers for him somehow. . . . She

had sworn she would.

The way that suggested itself was the obvious one, nor did it somehow seem to clash with her vows to remain true to his memory.

Just as a good artisan returns to his factory, takes up his tools, and starts on his work, she mechanically patted her hair into order, arranged her poor dress, and began as she used to in the old days when her man, sitting playing cards in the café, was the only thing in the world she cared about.

"Stop! . . . I want to speak to you. . . ."

But she was emaciated, the sharp angles and deep hollows of her body showing clearly under her thin cotton dress: one glance at her and the men hurried away. And indeed even her face was no longer a face for pleasure.

In bygone days when she was pretty, when she really was the "Blue Eyes" everyone admired, it was different. Now she was only an object of pity.

The daylight was fading. Suppose the cemetery was shut before she was able to buy the flowers?

A thin, misty rain was falling, silent, impalpable, and everything was becoming wrapped in gray shadows.

You could see nothing of her thin face now except her two great, sad eyes burning with fever.

A man was passing the corner of a quiet street, his coat-collar up, his hands in his pockets.

She brushed up against him and said softly, her whole heart's craving vibrating in her voice: "Stop! . . . Won't you come with me?"

He looked at her for a moment. She had gone close up to him, her eyes penetrating his with the inspired expression of one conscious of a high mission.

He took her arm, and she guided him to the place she had so recently left.

The men and the girls in the café bent forward to see who was there, and as she turned toward the stairs she heard exclamations and bursts of laughter.

It was almost dark when she threw a hasty good-by to her companion and set off at a run.

Stopping before the first flower-seller she came to, she seized the nearest bunch and threw down the two pieces of silver that clinked in her hands.

Quickly, quickly, she ran to the cemetery. People were coming away in little groups. She trembled. Would there still be time?

At the entrance the gatekeeper said:

"Too late! We're closing now."

"Oh! please, please. I only want to run in and out again. Just two minutes. . . ."

"Very well. But — quick."

Down the path she rushed, stumbling over the stones in the dark.

It was a long way. She could hardly breathe, something was burning so painfully in her chest. She stopped by the wall where those who are executed

are buried, and fell on her knees, scattering her flowers on the earth. Hot tears streamed from her eyes, dripping between the hand she pressed against her face. She tried to pray, but she could not remember any of the proper words, and she just sobbed, her lips on the ground:

"Oh! my man . . . my man. . . ."

Then, so worn out she had lost all sensation in her limbs, but with a feeling of ease, almost of joy in her heart, she rose and hurried away. She even smiled at the gatekeeper as she said:

"You see I haven't been long."

But now that it was over, now she had kept her promise, she became aware again of the cold and her exhaustion.

At last she got back to the hotel and stumbled into the door. The girls and men were still playing cards in the overheated, smoke-filled room. Silence fell on them all when they saw her. She tried to laugh.

A woman at the far end of the room threw herself back on her chair and cried:

"You've made a fine start, Blue Eyes. Needed a bit of nerve, didn't it?"

She shrugged her shoulders. The other went on:

"Did you know who it was?"

"No. . . ."

"Well, I'll tell you. It was Le Bingue."

Blue Eyes stammered.

"What do you say? Le . . ."

Emptying her glass and taking up her cards again, the girl called back:

"Yes, Le Bingue. . . . You know, the Executioner!"

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Answers to CrimInological Data

1. In Genesis, IV, Verses 15–24, there is a murder reference that has puzzled students of the Bible since time immemorial. It is the statement of Lamech, great-great-great-grandson of Cain, to his wives: "And Lamech said unto his wives, 'Hear my voice, ye wives of Lamech, and hearken unto my speech; for I have slain a man to my wounding, and a young man to my hurt.'"

   According to Hebraic legend, Lamech, misinformed by his son, Tubal-cain, killed Cain, mistaking him for a wild beast. When he discovered the crime he had committed, he beat his son to death.

   Modern scholars tend to dispute this. However, the case of Lamech must still go down as the first murder mystery in the recorded history of mankind.
2. Bloodstains cannot be definitely established as having come from a specific individual, but it can be established that certain bloodstains did *not* originate from an individual. Blood is divided into four definite blood groups: O — A — B — and AB. If a person with Group O blood claims that the blood on an object is his and the blood, on analysis, proves to be Group A, he is not telling the truth. But if the blood on the object *is* Group O, it does not necessarily follow that the blood came from this individual; it may have come from another person with Group O blood.
3. In prison slang a "hearse man" is a convicted murderer awaiting execution.
4. Literally, *portrait parle* means a spoken picture. It is a system used for the accurate description of criminals as developed by Bertillon. Although a great deal of the original system has been discarded by modern police science as too complicated, the general principles are closely followed. The *portrait parle* is considered one of the classics of police science and is required study in every recognized course of criminology.
5. No police department would carry a graphologist on the force. Graphology, although in a sense a branch of the science of handwriting analysis, has the same relation to that science as astrology has to astronomy. A graphologist claims to be able to foretell the future of a man, as well as read his past, by studying his handwriting.
6. In almost every case filed-off serial numbers can be brought out, even when the filing has

penetrated deeply. When the numbers are originally punched into the steel, the metal is compressed, not only on the surface but extending quite deeply into the metal. These numbers are usually brought out by treating the surface with one of the etching fluids used in metallurgical work. This method is also used on the motors of stolen automobiles, when the serial numbers have been apparently removed.

7. A "crime index" is a method of classifying criminals, not only by fingerprints and descriptions but also by their individual methods of committing a crime. Crime Indexes are maintained in all metropolitan police departments as well as in the Federal Bureau of Identification. In various forms it is used in nearly every country in the world.
8. Mr. Hemingway is a term used by professional gamblers to notify other members of the fraternity that he is a fellow "hustler" and intends to do his share in clipping the suckers. While it is always a good idea not to play cards with strangers, you can be nearly positive you are in for a trimming if you play with a stranger who introduces himself as Hemingway.
9. The principal classifications of fingerprints are five in number: (1) Arches — in which the ridges go from one side to the other without making a loop; (2) Tented Arches — which are a more or less pointed arch formation; (3) Radial Loops — in which one or more of the ridges turn and make a loop; the opening of a radial loop is toward the radial, or thumb, side of the hand; (4) Ulnar Loops — the same as Radial except that the opening is on the ulnar, or little finger, side of the hand; and (5) Whorls —which are spiral patterns of the ridges and all other forms too irregular to classify.
10. Tattooing is a term used by police to describe the marks left from unburnt or partially burnt powder grains deposited on the clothing or skin in shooting cases. This tattoo is very valuable in determining the distance from which the gun was fired. Very often it is the only means of establishing the fact that a person did not commit suicide.

"Q"

BLIND MAN'S BLUFF

by ROY VICKERS

UNTIL HE COMMITTED MURDER, Robert Swilbey was a model citizen. Everyone admired him for one or another of his qualities, including the go-getters who admired only his business abilities. The example of his courage under a devastating affliction helped other sufferers. Many who knew him well would speak of him almost reverently.

Yet he was, in vulgar parlance, a tough guy, with a toughness that would have frightened any gangster who had brain enough to understand it — a toughness with which even Scotland Yard was impressed.

"That man," said Chief Inspector Karslake, "practises all the virtues as if they were vices." All that, from Karslake, after a single murder!

His father was a country solicitor who, perceiving Robert to be something exceptional, scraped and saved and sent him to the Bar. He died when Robert was twenty-three, leaving him about a thousand pounds. Having no influence, Robert at first secured only dock briefs in defense of impecunious criminals. Through these he soon attracted favorable attention. But as his income remained perilously low, he occupied his spare time in writing sketches for West End revues — cheeky little seven-minute playlets — with enough success to enable him to carry on at the Bar without dipping into his small reserve.

His knowledge of law was but little above the average, but his advocacy was of a high order, and he had the adroitness of an old hand in humoring his Judges. His early success was helped, in some measure, by his magnificent physique, his full-toned voice, and his handsome face. Win or lose, he always made the most of his case. As generally happens to young defenders who show consistent ability, the Crown gave him a chance to function as prosecutor.

In his fourth year at the Bar, when he was twenty-six, he earned nearly a thousand pounds — six hundred in practice — the balance deriving from a minute share in the royalties of a revue to which he had contributed three playlets. He was already crawling along the road to success — a road along which he intended to gallop.

He had surprised himself by falling in love with Mildred Keltson, the daughter of a doctor who had attended him for a trifling ailment. Women tended to favor him: he had had his share of adventures and believed himself free from the danger of a serious entanglement. But Mildred did not appear to him as an entanglement. Tall and exquisitely shaped, with grey-green eyes and chestnut hair, intelligent and perceptive but temperamentally docile, she attracted

him as he had not been attracted before. Considered impartially, he told himself, she was an ideal wife for a man such as himself. He proposed and was accepted in February: they were to be married in the Easter vacation.

In this phase he is seen only as a successful young man obviously destined for a brilliant career. He was bumptious, but no more so than any other rising barrister, and certainly no tougher. The toughness was, as it were, flashed into being, a few days before the Easter vacation by a wretched woman called May Dinton, the associate of a burglar whom Swilbey was prosecuting.

It required no great ingenuity on Swilbey's part to destroy the alibi the girl was trying to create for her man. But he carried on for another hour and with some subtlety, extracted from her additional facts which aggravated the prisoner's guilt.

At dusk, when Swilbey was returning to his lodgings, May Dinton appeared from behind a pillar box.

"You got my boy seven years when the cops said the judge 'ud only give 'im three," she accused.

"My dear girl, what the cops say means nothing to do with me. I am sorry if you have been made unhappy, but you know that sort of thing is my job."

"You did more than you had to do for your pay. Twistin' my words round like that! You've made Ted think I ratted on him. But he won't think it any more — *now!*"

He had seen her draw a broad-stoppered bottle from under her coat: he supposed indifferently that she was about to swallow poison. He put up no guard — with the result that some three fluid ounces of vitriol splashed into his face.

On regaining consciousness after the operation, he asked when he would be likely to recover the use of his eyes. The doctor stalled, but broke down under Swilbey's expert questioning.

"Very well! Perhaps you'd better take the full shock while you are under our care. I am very sorry, Mr. Swilbey — there is no hope at all. Moreover — well, bluntly, old man, for appearance's sake, you'll have to wear two glass eyes."

"Thank you," said Swilbey. In the time it took to utter those two words he re-planned his career.

Inspector Karslake himself had come to the hospital. They were personally acquainted, and respected each other's work.

"D'you feel strong enough now, Mr. Swilbey, to tell us what happened?"

"I haven't the least idea."

It was not the smallest of Swilbey's achievements that he was able to think clearly while his body was racked with pain.

"We know it was May Dinton," prompted Karslake.

"But you can't prove it or we shouldn't be talking about it — you'd charge her. Sorry, Karslake! I can't afford vengeance. Got to be very eco-

nomical. Got to avoid law courts. Got to forget I was once a lawyer."

The bumptious young barrister had been drowned in three ounces of vitriol, and Swilbey's unquenchable vitality was already creating a new personality, which had to be coddled during its infancy. He must forget May Dinton as well as the Law. The new personality must have no grievance against life, or it would not make the grade.

Through a nurse, he wrote to Mildred: *Please don't come to see me until the pain has passed. Pain in your presence would confuse me.*

These words show he was aware that, no matter how much his personality might change, he would still have a normal nervous system, would still be sensitive to the charm of women, with all its disturbances. Mildred, of course, would be in charge of that side of his life. So there need be no disturbances.

Mildred's father visited him every day. Swilbey found the visits tedious, except when they were talking about Mildred.

"You'll very soon feel well enough to let her come, won't you?"

"Practically ready now. Say the day after tomorrow."

"I'll tell her." Dr. Keltson cleared his throat. "There's one thing I want to mention before then. I can safely say that Mildred will keep her promise to marry you, if she sees that you wish to — er — hold her to it."

"There's no means by which a man can 'hold' a woman to such a promise."

"Oh, yes, there is, my friend!" The father was fighting for his daughter's happiness and dared not soften his words. "When Mildred accepted you, you were on the threshold of a brilliant career. She must have looked forward — quite properly — to sharing fame and prosperity with you. By a tragic accident you can now offer her only poverty and a treadmill of small services to yourself. Show that you expect her to stick to you, and she will. As would any woman of character."

Dr. Keltson had done his painful duty. The answer brought him but cold comfort.

"You want me to humbug her with a wistful little speech about my not having the right to blight her life. Wistfulness is not in my program. You needn't worry. I shall not blight her life. I shall give her a square deal."

He meant what he said. Indeed, Swilbey never lied to himself nor anyone else — except, eventually, to the police. But he failed to see that in the matter of Mildred he had appointed himself judge in his own cause — to his own ultimate ruin.

When she came to the hospital, he was still bandaged — was in a chair on a terrace overlooking the river. A motor launch was passing and he did not hear her approach.

"I'm here, Robert," she said and thrust her hand in his. The significance of having to announce herself to him upset her self-control. A tear

dropped on his wrist.

"Darling, you've got the wrong slant on this!" he exclaimed eagerly. "To us it won't make any essential difference. I've adapted my thoughts to it and know I can manage it. Listen! Believe I'm telling the truth and not just trying to cheer you up. These last few seconds — while I've been holding your hand — I've taken a great leap forward. You've touched some nerve or other. I can *visualize!*"

"I'm glad, dear, but I don't understand. Go on talking about it — it'll make it easier."

"Darkness!" he exclaimed. "At first you're always waiting, waiting for the light. Having breakfast in total darkness! It muddles your other senses, produces a sort of animal fear. I found difficulty in thinking of things by their shape and color. But now — holding your hand — I can see the sun shining on your hair, making the wavy bit in front look like copper wire. I can get the angle of the sun, too. It doesn't matter a damn if the sun isn't actually shining at the moment. The important thing is that I can visualize the effect of light under the stimulus of an emotional urge — meaning you. That guarantees I shall be able to visualize stage lighting."

Fascinated by the mechanism of his own brain, he pursued his thoughts in silence, which she broke.

"While you're here, could I come every day to teach you Braille?"

"I'm not going to learn Braille — nor anything else the blind learn. I'm not going to be a blind man. I'm an ordinary man, who can't see."

That which she believed to be his pathetic courage, his gallant faith in the wreck of himself, destroyed her judgment — though it is easy to see, even at this stage, that there was no pathos in his courage, and that he had not been wrecked by his blindness.

"This is the program. I've got one toe in the theatre with those sketches. I intend to plant both feet. Now, when I've paid up here I shall have about fourteen hundred pounds, all told. I shall want five hundred for my working expenses, which will include the purchase of a dictaphone."

He proceeded to detail a practical plan of domestic finance. "Allow a hundred and fifty for our honeymoon and unforeseen expenses after we move in, and we shall have a reserve of eighteen months at the rate of five hundred a year. I shall be well in the swim within six months. Have you made notes of all this?"

"Yes, Robert." Prudence was awakening. Suppose he were not "well in the swim" — ever?

"If you'll see my bank manager we'll fix a power of attorney so that you can deal with the checks and the contracts. Remember, I can't sign my name. By the way, you'll have to do a lot of reading for me at first. Shall you mind?"

She answered that she would not mind. Her tone made him ask:

"I say, darling! The program as a whole? Including me? I've been rushing on, building a new life on your shoulders. Feel like it — or not?"

She was, in the words of her father, a woman of character. To leave him in the lurch would be utterly impossible. She bent and kissed him.

"It will be wonderful — building together," she said, which was exactly what he had expected her to say. He visualized the expression on her face as she said it. But the visualized expression was quite different from her actual expression of honest doubt of herself and him.

"I shall have these bandages off in a fortnight," he told her — and altogether failed to visualize the shudder that followed his words.

For the next few years we see Robert Swilbey as the embodiment of the virtues extolled in the literature of success. In him character really did triumph against enormous odds. He did laugh at his setbacks. He did believe that failure was impossible. Also, of course, "luck came to him who earned it." His stage plays happened to be adaptable to a certain comedian in whom Hollywood had sunk a good deal of capital, and Swilbey's rates rose with each success.

In the first year he climbed on Mildred's shoulders more than he realized. Indeed, Mildred herself did not know that it was she who put him so quickly into the West End. His first full-length farcical comedy was tried out in the provinces, seven months after their wedding. It was undercapitalized and badly mounted and was in some danger of collapse, when Turley Wain saw it in Liverpool.

Wain was a company promoter, mainly in the cotton market, with no expert knowledge of the theatre, who had the amateur's belief that he could spot a winner. He was impressed by Swilbey's dynamic drive, but he was more impressed, in a different way, by Mildred's courage and devoted care. He could see that he was in a position to dictate terms, but in Mildred's presence he held his hand and let Swilbey drive him. True that he eventually made money out of the play. But Swilbey made so much that he was able to finance his next play himself. Before the run had ended, Wain came to live in London and thereafter saw much of Mildred, without suspecting danger.

At the end of six years, living in affluence and with strong financial reserves, Swilbey believed that his marriage was as successful as his career. He was unaware that after the first eighteen months of struggle Mildred had been extremely unhappy. Even on their honeymoon, he had refused to perceive that her feeling for him had become exclusively maternal and protective. This feeling had been steadily thwarted by his progressive efficiency.

While they were still comparatively poor she had the arduous task of keeping him abreast of events and ideas by reading to him for long stretches every day. Then she had to take him for walks and in the intervals run the home with inadequate assistance. But the comradeship of it sustained her, gave her a sense of fulfillment.

Yet even in this first phase of their

marriage, she had what one may call the first premonition of the ultimate disaster. She took her fear to her father.

"He drives himself so hard, Daddy. And although in a way it's all so splendid, I'm a little worried as to whether it's quite — healthy. I know you'll think I'm a fool — I think so myself — but this happens. When we're discussing plans for the week, he speaks as if he and I were making arrangements about someone else. He even says: '*he* must go to that rehearsal, and if we can get *him* back in good time we'll let *him* try a re-write of that last scene before *he* goes to bed.' The frightening part is that it's not meant to be funny. He only speaks like that when he is very concentrated."

"There's nothing in that," said Dr. Keltson. "I suspect you've been reading some stuff about split personality without, my dear, quite understanding what you read. I'm no psychiatrist, but I can tell you that, though it does attack exceptionally clever people sometimes, there's no fear at all with a balanced, mentally disciplined man like Robert. I've never met any man I admire more — for mental discipline, I mean."

Six years later she again approached her father on the same subject.

"He's begun to 'split' me now," she told him. "Yesterday, I read a contract to him. He said: 'Ah! *There's* something for him to tell his wife!' And he did tell me, last night. He always does tell me how wonderful he is. This time, he spoke as if I knew nothing about the contract."

Dr. Keltson was still unimpressed. He asked: "Anything else? Has he any morbid habits?"

"Not that I know of. But I see so little of him except for business, or when others are there. He won't go for walks any more. He 'goes for a row' in that rowing contraption in the gym that makes a noise like a real boat on real water. And a bicycle-thing that can make him feel he's going up and down hills. And he has a journalist to read to him. If anything gets in his way he invents an expensive gadget so that he need not ask me to help him. He has so built things round him — things and persons — that I don't believe he any longer wishes he could see. Perhaps that's morbid."

"You aren't happy with him, Mildred, are you?"

"No!" She added: "What makes it uncanny is that he *is* happy with me. I suppose I'm beastly to him pretty often. It never hurts his feelings. He never retaliates — just cleverly makes me feel ashamed of myself. And then" — she shuddered — "we make up!"

"Well, at least he is loyal to you. At the back of my mind —"

"Loyal?" It was as if she asked herself a question. "Women run after him. He's so big and strong — and handsome, if you can ignore his poor, staring eyes. But I think he's afraid they might put him out of his stride. He's positively Victorian with them. When he's going to rehearse a new

actress he sends for me. He says to the girl: 'It's essential that I should be able to visualize you. May I touch you?' And then I have to chip in and say something pleasant.

"At the back of my mind —"

" '*May I touch you!*' " she repeated bitterly. "With me standing by to make it impersonal and uncompromising. That's what I'm for. I'm not his wife. I'm just — *women*!"

"At the back of my mind, my dear girl, there has been for some time the feeling that I ought to warn you that there are whispers about your friendship with Mr. Wain. I know there can be nothing in it — but there it is!"

About the same time the whisper reached Swilbey.

Every Tuesday night Swilbey gave a party in his house in St. John's Wood, a couple of miles from theatreland. For the rest of the week he was strictly not-at-home to anybody to whom he had not given a definite appointment.

In the lofty L-shaped drawing-room that was also his working room he would hold an inner court round his gadget-laden armchair.

Now and again he would rise and walk among his guests, who were required merely to avoid impeding his progress. His system enabled him always to know where he was standing in his house or in the theatre. On first nights he could walk unaided to the proper spot from which to take his author's call — for which purpose he wore spectacles and a careful make-up; for he did not wish his public to know that he "could not see."

It was by the bend of the "L" that he overheard the whisper; and for the first time since he lost his sight he found himself shirking a reality.

For some days he vacillated. Mildred's behavior to himself was the same as it had been for years. He worked out ways of asking her for details — a frank approach. But in his heart he was afraid of receiving a frank answer that would break the smooth routine of his career. On the fourth day he wrote to Wain, under a thin pretense of being able to offer him another flutter in the theatre.

He received him, as he received everybody, alone in the drawing-room.

"I say, old man! Some infernal scandalmongers have been coupling your name and Mildred's. I thought you and I had better get together about it. Cards on the table and all that!"

He was alarmed by the length of the pause before Wain answered.

"Before I say anything else, Swilbey, I have nothing to confess to you. I've never so much as touched her hand. I can't imagine what is being said. We have always taken care not to give the talkers a chance."

That killed the last hope that there might be nothing in it. Wain seemed to think that Mildred had already discussed it.

"I'd better go on." Wain's voice sounded unctuous and sentimental. "I've been in love with her for years,

and shall be all my life. But I doubt whether she knows it's any more than friendship. Anyhow, if circumstances were normal I would speak to her — then ask you for a divorce. I've told you all there is to tell, Swilbey."

"I appreciate that." The fellow, thought Swilbey, was a mere sentimentalist, who would run from a challenge. "But I don't follow that bit about 'normal circumstances.' Why not speak to her? I have never regarded women as property. I stake no prior claim. How do we know she wouldn't be happier with you?"

Sentimentalist or not, Wain shook the edifice of six years with his answer.

"Swilbey, you asked for cards on the table. So you'll let me say that we both know she would be happier with me — if I could retain my self-respect. But how could I? Knowing I had taken his wife from a blind man?"

In the recesses of Swilbey's brain, a voice was speaking about Swilbey: *That'll upset him — calling him a blind man! Mind he doesn't do anything rash.*

Through darkness the other voice, that of Wain, penetrated.

"To Mildred your well-being is a sacred mission, Swilbey. Her power of attorney has more than legal significance. She stands between you and the outside world with which you could not cope, even with all your assistants and servants. You would be the first to acknowledge that you owe your career not only to your own qualities but also to hers."

Again came the illusion of an inner voice speaking: *Look out! That'll make him worse. Wain is telling him that he's a blind man living on the charity of his wife's eyes.*

"I quite agree." Swilbey's voice was calm as ever. "By the way, years ago — when I was starting — did you finance my play because of Mildred?"

"N-no. At least, I don't think so. Not altogether. Does it matter, now?"

The personality had been thumped into numbness. Only the mannerisms remained active — and some resolution he did not yet understand. Swilbey rose from his chair.

"I'm glad we've had this talk. One way and another, Wain, you've been a factor in my life. I would like to be able to visualize you. May I touch you?"

"Of course! I'm a shrimp compared with you."

"Yes, you're shorter. And you've kept slim." The hands crept lightly to the head, crept over the features, outlining the heavy, prominent chin with a dimple in it, crept below the chin to the throat —

Don't let him do anything rash!

But how would it be possible to keep "him" quiet? For the first time for six years consciousness of the perpetual darkness returned, and with it the animal fear.

At six o'clock, Menceman, the journalist, came as usual with a digest of the day's papers. Swilbey barely heard a word throughout the hour's reading. At seven-thirty, when he was going upstairs to prepare for dinner, he crashed into the balustrade.

The parlormaid, who had been

with him for years, gasped with astonishment. Never before had she seen him miss his direction.

"Have you hurt yourself, sir?"

"No, thanks. My foot slipped," he lied.

That evening, alone with Mildred in her little sitting-room upstairs, he got up to go to bed, faltered, and then: "Will you take me to my room, please?"

Sheer astonishment made her ask: "Why, Robert?"

"Because I'm blind!" he cried, and broke down like a child.

The next day Mildred beat down his protests and took him for a holiday up the river where he could scull for hours while she steered. The first nervous crisis passed. She made no mention of Wain.

He evolved, during that holiday, an interim personality — an understudy to sustain the role of Robert Swilbey. All the mannerisms were faithfully copied, but the inspiration was lacking. The interim personality could not write dialogue that sparkled with clever nonsense. He was working then on *Playgirl Wanted*, but had to abandon it before he had completed the first act.

"Menceman, I'm going to try my hand at straight drama. I shall have a background of police work, treated realistically. You might begin by going through the verbatim reports of trials, picking out the small points overlooked by intelligent murderers."

Now and again, the inner voice would register a half-hearted warning. *He's planning to kill Wain. Better humor him.*

"David Durham advised me to have a model theatre on the table beside me, as he does," he told Mildred. "Of course, my sense of touch isn't developed enough for that sort of thing. But I could rig up a model stage at the other end of the drawing-room." He meant at the short end of the "L." "Scale about one to four I should think. I could use it, too, for rehearsing special scenes."

He spent sixteen hundred pounds on what became not a model but a miniature stage, with many of the fitments of a full-sized stage. Unable to concentrate enough for original work, he rehearsed revivals on the miniature stage.

At rehearsals he necessarily worked through a subordinate stage manager.

"I want to be able to handle the rigging myself — get the feel of the controls," said Swilbey, because he now knew that he intended to hang Wain, thereby giving the murder the outward semblance of an execution.

There is no doubt that Swilbey planned the murder of Wain in minute detail. But there is considerable doubt whether he meant to carry it out. Remember that daydreams and fancies and castles-in-the-air possess a special kind of reality to a playwright — they become as real to him as a parcel of speculative shares is to a business man.

In a sense, Swilbey soothed his wounded ego by murdering Wain

every night. The taunt of being a blind man, who could only hold his woman by invoking her pity, was nightly avenged by the fatal blow that was not actually struck. Nightly, too, the heads of Scotland Yard were made to confess themselves beaten by the dazzling brilliance of Robert Swilbey — a man who, as it happened, could not see.

Certain it is that for two years he made no attempt to use the "engine of death," as counsel called it — more simply, the essential parts of a gallows, disguised as rigging for shifting scenes and the heavier stage properties. Nor did he take any step to lure Wain to the house. Ironically, Wain was, as it were, put on the spot by Mildred herself.

"I want to ask something of you, Robert," she began. "About Turley Wain. It's two years now since he gave you an explanation. He told me at the time that you had been very kind to him."

"He was very kind to me. I told him I'd fix a divorce, if you wanted it."

He hoped she would say she had never, and would never, want a divorce. But she did not. The darkness came down on him again.

"We exchanged parting gifts. I have only seen him once since then. Today. He is very changed. I drew from him that things have gone very badly with him, and he expects to be made bankrupt. Will you help him?"

"Of course, I will! Apart from your friendship with him, he did me a good turn when he financed *Brenda Gets Married.*"

He felt her approaching. The darkness vanished as he visualized her physical beauty against the background of a sun-lit flower garden. She thanked him warmly — because he had said he would help Turley Wain.

"When shall I tell him to come and see you about it?"

In the nightly murder Wain always arrived at five-thirty on a winter afternoon. And Mildred was always out of the house. He reminded himself now that, on Fridays, Mildred always visited her parents, who were in retirement in Canterbury.

"Next Friday at five-thirty," he answered, and added: "February fifteenth — my birthday — good omen for Wain!"

It was about five-thirty when he came, Inspector. I was in the rehearsal theatre. I showed him the tackle for shifting the heavier pieces. That was part of the scene in which the police, every night, were "hopelessly baffled."

On Friday Mildred left for Canterbury after lunch; she would stay for dinner, returning on the last train.

At five-thirty precisely, the parlormaid announced Wain. Speaking from the miniature stage, Swilbey greeted him with the opening lines composed two years ago.

"Hullo, Wain! I've just finished here. You haven't seen this little rig-out before, have you?" Swilbey could hear the parlormaid drawing the curtains. He spoke loudly enough for her

to hear. "It's the engineering I'm proud of. Have to haul everything up to the flies when we want a change. With the double reduction on these pulleys, a child could manage it — designed the whole thing myself. How's that for a blind man, eh! Have a cigarette?"

He felt for his cigarette case in one pocket and another. Like many a sighted man, he was never sure of his pockets.

"You dropped it on that bench, sir." The parlormaid left the curtains, hurried to the stage, recovered the cigarette case, and handed it to Swilbey.

Wain, who did not know that the very word "blind" was a danger signal, made polite murmurs. When Swilbey heard the parlormaid draw the last curtain, he said:

"Let's go and sit down. I won't bother to put the tackle away."

Back together down the short arm of the "L," a left turn into the long arm, to his armchair and the group of chairs round it. Swilbey felt the hands of his watch. Five thirty-four. Not a minute to waste.

"Mildred told me you might go bankrupt. How much do you want?"

"Bankruptcy is one thing. There's another!" Judging by his voice, Wain had gone to pieces — he was almost cringing. "To leave out technicalities, I got caught in a landslide, Swilbey. I swear to you I didn't try to save myself at the expense of others. I threw in all my own resources, including even my furniture, when I need not have done so. It wasn't nearly enough. In trying to save the invest ments of others I committed a technical breach of the criminal law. At this moment I am actually wanted by the police."

"Better give me the figures!" Thirty-eight minutes past five. The babble must not last more than another four minutes. And he mustn't forget Wain's cigarette. It might set the house on fire — which would disarrange the plan.

Wain seemed to shrink from coming to the point.

"Last week a detective came to see me. Very decent fellow. Karslake. He knew you when you were at the Bar. I drew wool over his eyes because I didn't want to be arrested there and then. And now I'm keeping out of his way."

"Wain, old man, how much do you want?"

"The technical breach — well, five thousand pounds would cover that. But look here, Swilbey, I've no excuse for asking you."

"Yes, you have. You and Mildred together made it possible for a blind man to make a living. My career pivots on you two. She hinted that you might want a wad of ready cash. Come with me."

Swilbey felt some squeamishness in promising money that would never be given. But there is no gentlemanly method of committing murder.

"D'you mind putting your cigarette out, old man? Have to be careful of fire where we're going."

On the way back round the turn of the "L," to the rehearsal theatre, he asked:

"And what about the bankruptcy?"

"Astronomical! Fifty thousand pounds, if a penny!"

"Hm! We'll have to talk about that later. We're going over the stage. That door at the back is still in use. All right! I can manage. In their own place, the blind can manage as if they were not blind. Mind that pulley!"

Wain, as he had himself said, was a shrimp beside Swilbey. Moreover, he did not know how to use what little weight and strength he had. So the "compensatory fantasy" was translated into reality without muscular strain.

When Wain was dead, Swilbey turned on the main switch which flooded the stage with light. The room lights of the short arm of the "L" had been turned on by the parlormaid.

The parlormaid! Halfway to the corner he stopped. He had had a sudden mental picture of the parlormaid handing him his cigarette case after he had dropped it on the bench.

"If I've dropped anything this time —"

He went back to the stage and groped on the bench: he was leaving when his foot touched something on the floor which ought not to have been there. He bent down.

"That damned case again!" Like frightened snakes, his fingers slid over the tessellated pattern of the slim gold case. "Phew! I had a sort of intuition. Subconscious memory. Good! It means '*he*' won't make any mistakes!"

He thrust the case into his breast pocket and hurried away.

At four minutes to six Swilbey, back in his gadget-laden armchair, switched on the radio. Luck again came to him who had earned it. A drama critic was talking.

At six punctually, just as the radio critic was finishing, Menceman, the journalist, came in.

Swilbey turned off the radio and spoke as if Wain were sitting near him.

"Wain," he said, "let me introduce Mr. Menceman who —"

"There's no one in the room but ourselves, Mr. Swilbey."

"Oh, then Wain must have slipped out — I had to listen to that critique. You've heard of Wain — of course! My fairy godfather. Backed my first play. Badly hit in the Slump. Let's have the Slump news first."

There was no fear of Menceman strolling about the room, turning the bend of the "L" and seeing the corpse.

Swilbey gave his full attention. The plan was fulfilling itself. Menceman would leave at seven. By domestic routine a housemaid would discover the body of Turley Wain at seven-thirty, by which time he would be in his room dressing for dinner.

But at nine minutes to seven the sequence of the plan was broken by the house telephone.

"An officer from Scotland Yard, sir. Chief Inspector Karslake. He wants to speak to Mr. Wain."

For a second only Swilbey hesitated.

"Mr. Wain left a long time ago. But tell Mr. Karslake I would like to see him if he can spare the time."

With a nod he dismissed Menceman and concentrated on the problem of the detective.

Swilbey held out his hand and waited, as the blind do, for Karslake to grip it.

"It's good to see you after all these years, Mr. Swilbey. I always take the wife to one of your plays when I get the chance."

"And it's good to hear your voice!" echoed Swilbey. "We must have a chat sometime. At present you've got something on your mind, and Wain has told me what it is. You may take it that will be settled at once — in full."

"Well, I'm glad to hear it, since he's a friend of yours. All the same, I can't stop the machinery at this stage, as you know. Can I see him, please?"

"He's not here," said Swilbey. "Left about six."

There was a short, strained silence.

"Mr. Swilbey, his coat and hat are in your vestibule."

"Surely not! Wait a minute." On the house telephone he spoke to the parlormaid.

"What time did Mr. Wain leave?"

"He hasn't left, sir. I thought he was in the drawing-room with you."

Swilbey repeated the girl's words.

"Then d'you mean to say he sneaked out of the room without saying good-bye or anything?" asked Karslake.

"Apparently, he did. I'd told him what I could do for him, and we'd really finished. I asked him to excuse me for a few minutes as I wanted to hear the end of a dramatic critique on the radio. At six, when Menceman came in — you saw him just now — I began to introduce them, when Menceman told me Wain wasn't here."

Karslake noted a half-smoked cigarette on the ashtray by his side: nothing in the tray within Swilbey's reach. That tallied with what Swilbey was saying.

"He left the room, then, but not the house," said Karslake.

"He wouldn't wander about my house without permission," asserted Swilbey. "It's much more likely that he heard Menceman arrive and thought it was you coming to collect him. He was in a very nervy state."

"If he left the house — without his hat and coat — which way did he go?" pressed Karslake.

Swilbey had seen that question coming — had seen, too, that he was in no danger, provided he did not shirk the logic of his position.

"He could have got into the garden by going through the door at the back of my rehearsal stage, and along the corridor. That door was locked on this side. If he slipped out that way, it must be unlocked now."

"Can I have a look at that door?"

Swilbey stood up.

"Come with me," he invited. "The stage is in this room — round the corner."

Karslake followed Swilbey round the corner of the "L." A corpse, as

such, could not shake Karslake's nerve. But his nerve was shaken this time, partly because he thought, for a second or two, that the corpse was a stage property.

Looking some thirty feet down the short arm of the "L," he saw a well-lit stage-set of a saloon bar. Left back, at an angle, was the bar, with shining pump handles; left, a pin-table; right, a bench in green plush; and centre, a human form suspended by its neck in what appeared to be a noose attached to the hook of a pulley block.

Two paces nearer he recognized the features of Turley Wain.

"What?" Swilbey stopped in his stride. "Did you speak?"

"No. It's all right." Karslake was thinking quickly. "Carry on, please, Mr. Swilbey."

Swilbey, a couple of feet ahead, walked on. With the steadiness of a sighted man, he stepped on to the stage. He passed within a dozen inches of the man who was obviously dead. So to the back of the miniature stage.

"Nothing doing!" exclaimed Swilbey. "The door is still locked on this side."

Fascinated, Karslake watched Swilbey return, wondering whether, this time, he would collide with the dangling corpse. Again there were a dozen inches to spare. Perhaps, he reflected, the blind always walked in the same track in familiar surroundings.

"Surely it isn't worth investigating, Karslake! The charge against him is pretty certain to be dropped, after restitution. Forget it for a few minutes and have a drink."

"That sounds like a good idea," said Karslake, who had meantime satisfied himself that there was no hope of saving life.

Back, with the blind man, round the corner of the "L" to his chair. Swilbey sat down. Sitting gave him the range of all the gadgets. He leaned forward and opened the door of a cabinet.

"Whiskey, gin or —"

"Whiskey, please." Karslake glanced uneasily at a row of decanters. "Allow me!"

"It's all right, thanks. You sit down." Swilbey's voice had a slight edge to it. He passed his guest the whiskey decanter, a tumbler and a siphon, then held out his hand for the return of the decanter.

"Can I pour yours for you, Mr. Swilbey?"

"No, thanks!" Swilbey's tone barely escaped rudeness.

Karslake watched Swilbey pour his own drink with a deftness that made his hands seem like independent agents, able to think and act for themselves. Meantime, he was groping for a line of action. That corpse, actually in the same room with them, presented a tricky problem in presence of mind.

"Cigarette, Karslake?"

"Oh — er — thanks!"

Swilbey thrust his hand into his breast pocket for his cigarette case — kept it there for seconds as if his arm were paralyzed. Then he tried his side pockets.

Karslake saw a thin, tessellated gold cigarette case on the ledge, flush with the dictaphone. But he had observed that Swilbey was very touchy about being helped. So Karslake said nothing.

"Dammit, I thought I had my case on me!"

Karslake was glad of the respite. His mind on the corpse, he watched Swilbey's hand creeping, spiderlike, along the ledge by the dictaphone.

"Ah, here it is!"

For an instant the hand hovered, quivering over the case as if it were puzzled. Karslake dismissed this eerie fancy, took the offered cigarette, and made his decision.

"To come back to Wain for a moment," said Karslake, "you might tell me exactly what happened while he was here."

This was the cue for the scene in which the police were "hopelessly baffled."

He had but to repeat the oft-repeated words.

"It was about five-thirty when he came. I was in the rehearsal theatre. I showed him the tackle for shifting the heavier pieces. Then we came back here and talked. He told me he had committed a technical breach of the criminal law and that he was playing tag with you. Mentioned you by name and said you remembered me. I said I'd let him have the five thousand in the morning. Then he explained that he would be in for a civil bankruptcy to the tune of fifty thousand pounds. I said bluntly I couldn't manage that much — after which things became mildly unpleasant."

"What sort of unpleasantness?"

"After I'd turned down the fifty thousand idea, he said something about the five thousand being wasted — that it would be cheaper for all if he jumped off Waterloo Bridge on a dark night — the usual suicide threat that is never implemented. Between ourselves, Karslake, I don't like that man. He financed my first play. I admit he was thundering useful to me at the time, and I'm glad to let him have the five thousand. Fifty thousand is another pair o' shoes. So I made the excuse that I had to listen to the radio critique. And I suppose he buzzed off in a huff as well as a panic.

"He's coming here tomorrow morning for the five thousand, and he's sure to surrender to you as soon as he's got it, so you don't have to worry. Have another drink?"

"No thanks. May I use your telephone?"

Karslake dialed the Yard, asked for an internal number, then gave Swilbey's address.

"Homicide!" said Karslake. "I'll be here when the team arrives." He hung up. "Wain is on that stage of yours, Mr. Swilbey — with his neck in that scene-shifting tackle."

"My God! Doing it in my house!" exclaimed Swilbey. "That's a dirty, malicious trick, Karslake! The publicity will do me no good — no darned good at all."

It was near the truth to say that

Robert Swilbey was disappointed when it appeared that the police were not "baffled" — that they hadn't the wit to see that there was anything to be baffled about. On the other hand, he received, in the Coroner's court, a severe shock which put him momentarily in fear of his life. For the Coroner described exactly how Wain had been murdered — which Swilbey had thought no one could ever guess.

"Accident," said the Coroner to his jury, when all the evidence had been heard, "may be ruled out. If you are to return a positive verdict, therefore, you must decide between murder and suicide. Let us consider what evidence, if any, supports the theory of murder."

He dwelt on the virtual impossibility of anyone entering the drawing-room without the servants or Swilbey being aware of it — he elaborated obvious absurdities.

"Apart from such absurdities, you have to postulate — to sustain the hypothesis of murder — a very powerful man who suddenly attacked the deceased, constricting his victim's throat so that he could not cry out — or the servants, to say nothing of Mr. Swilbey, would have heard him. For this purpose he used a curtain cord, an item in the fittings of the stage set. This hypothetical murderer then proceeded, in the clumsiest possible manner, to attach his victim to the hook on the pulley block.

"As you have been told, the device of a noose, or slip-knot, was not employed. A curtain cord, itself a stage property securing a curtain on the stage set, was wound round the throat of the deceased in such a manner as to make four complete coils. This cord was tied at the back of deceased's neck with three knots — the kind of simple knot which one uses for one's shoe laces, the difference being that this simple knot was tied three times instead of once. Through three of the coils, the hook beneath the pulley block was inserted, greatly increasing the pressure of the coils round the neck. The hands were unbound. Medical evidence as to the condition of the hands — and microscopic examination of the ropes above the pulley block — make it clear that the unhappy man attempted to free himself by reaching above his head and pulling on the ropes.

"Why did our hypothetical murderer permit this attempt to frustrate his purpose? Add that this eccentric murderer must have swung the dead, or unconscious, body in such a way that the shoes could be pressed into the upholstery of the bench — and you may come to the conclusion that no such person as the murderer existed."

The Coroner had reconstructed the murder in order to ridicule the theory of murder. As a dramatist, Swilbey knew the danger of playing tricks like that on an audience, who would sometimes pick up an unexpected angle. But the fact of his blindness — above all, Karslake's evidence of his behavior in the presence of the corpse — headed off suspicion.

Swilbey's dread was dispelled when the Coroner went on to say what Swilbey had intended him to say.

"On the hypothesis of suicide the deceased slipped silently away when Mr. Swilbey turned on the radio. After adjusting the pulley to the height he required, he wound the curtain cord round his throat, as one might wind a narrow scarf, and tied it, as described, at the back. He stood on the bench, worked the hook under the coils, then swung himself off the bench. Police measurements, on the chart before you, show that the ropes would then swing, pendulum-wise, to the centre of the stage, bringing the feet of the deceased within three and a half inches of the floor.

"Like many a suicide and would-be suicide before him, he repented of his act before it had been completed, and tried to interrupt it. Had he secured himself with a noose, he would in all probability have succeeded. To free the hook from the coils of curtain cord was a great deal more difficult than loosening a slip-knot — doubly so, through the fact that his jaw was large and prominent."

The jury, ever ready to believe that a simple explanation must be the true one, accepted the Coroner's interpretation. Only Chief Inspector Karslake was heard to mumble that the suicide had been clear-headed enough to measure the pendulum swing, correct to three and a half inches. After a verdict of suicide while of unsound mind, public interest in the case evaporated.

On the evening following the inquest, Robert Swilbey resumed work on the first act of *Playgirl Wanted*, abandoned two years previously. The play was put on the following autumn. It ran all through the following year.

Eighteen months later he was at work on another play — when the end came.

A junior detective from another department flung open the door of the Department of Dead Ends and ushered in a seedy individual with patched trousers but a very decent sports coat.

"This is Mr. Joe Byker, sir," said the detective facetiously. "Hensons', the pawnbrokers, 'phoned us. Mr. Byker was trying to pawn this." He laid on the table a slim gold cigarette case with a tessellated design. "Mr. Byker says the case is his and he bought it with his own money."

Among the burglaries, petty thefts and whatnot on Detective-Inspector Rason's file were eleven missing gold cigarette cases, five with tessellated design. He opened the case in the hope of finding some identifying mark.

For Remembrance he read. No name. No initials.

"You bought it, eh, Byker! From a man in a pub whose name you don't know?"

"No, sir. I bought it right enough, a matter o' six weeks ago, off a respectable dealer name o' Clawsons, Theobalds Road."

"They're second-hand clothes dealers, Byker."

"That's right, sir. Matter o' six weeks ago I bought this 'ere sports coat as I'm wearin' this very minute, sir, and I didn't know till this morning when I was havin' me breakfast that I'd bought that cigarette case with it. In here it was, sir." He took the coat off. "In between these two bits o' stiffening — that's where I had to cut the lining to get it out. And me walking about with it for a matter o' six weeks."

Clawson, the dealer, was able to supply the name and address of the man from whom he had bought the sports coat. Interviewed by Rason, the vendor of the coat was inclined to be indignant.

"Yes, I sold it to Clawson's — and what's the matter with that? The missis gave it to me to do what I liked with."

"And who is the missis?"

"Mrs. Swilbey — wife of the gentleman who writes all them plays. I'm his gardener."

Swilbey, a writer of plays! In a few minutes Rason remembered the freak suicide of eighteen months ago. Byker would drop in for "stealing by finding" if Mrs. Swilbey would consent to prosecute, he reflected on his way to the house in St. John's Wood.

"Perhaps you could tell me, Mrs. Swilbey, whether this is your husband's cigarette case?"

"It looks like it. I wonder where he dropped it!"

Mildred took the case, opened it, and caught her breath.

"No," she said. "It is not my husband's."

"But you do know whose it is, Mrs. Swilbey!" It was a statement, not a question.

"It belonged to a friend of ours who — is dead. A Mr. Wain. I gave it to him myself. It is exactly like the one I gave to my husband — bought at the same place. That's why I thought at first it was his."

"Mr. Wain," repeated Rason. "I remember. Very sad. You're sure this is the case you gave Mr. Wain?"

"Quite!" She added the name of the jeweler where she had bought both cases. "How did it come into your hands, Mr. Rason?"

"It has been stolen," answered Rason, and bowed himself out.

He checked up at the jeweler's, then decided reluctantly that he must bring Chief Inspector Karslake into it.

"He was a lawyer once," warned Karslake, as it was Rason's case. "You won't get him to admit anything. But I'll stooge you all I can."

At five-thirty that afternoon they were being shown into the "L" shaped drawing-room. Karslake introduced Rason with a somewhat elaborate heartiness.

"I've got to worry you about the estate in bankruptcy of the late Turley Wain, Mr. Swilbey," said Rason.

"Before we start, Mr. Swilbey," cut in Karslake, "d'you mind if we smoke?"

"Do! Here, have a cigarette!" Swilbey felt in one pocket and then an-

other, then found his cigarette case on the ledge that was flush with the dictaphone. "I don't know anything about Wain's affairs."

Rason observed the cigarette case. It looked exactly like Wain's — the same tessellated design. It would feel the same to a blind man — and that was all Rason wanted to know.

"What an extraordinary thing!" exclaimed Rason. "That case is exactly like Turley Wain's." He added carefully. "You may remember — it dropped out of Wain's pocket — onto the floor of your stage — during the poor chap's struggles."

There was a tiny perceptible stiffening of the large frame. But it was the long pause that made Rason sure of his ground.

"I don't remember, because I was never told," said Swilbey.

"You didn't need telling! You picked the cigarette case up after you had killed him. You thought it was yours, because it feels the same. And you put it in your pocket. It was in your pocket when you were sitting in here, offering Mr. Karslake a cigarette."

"Any ass can make wild assertions!" snapped Swilbey. "Are you in this foolery, Karslake?"

"Well, Mr. Swilbey, I must say I do remember your offering me a cigarette out of a gold case."

"Then I wonder, my dear Karslake —" Swilbey had pounced as, years ago, he would pounce on a witness "— I wonder whether you also remember that the case was *not* in my pocket, as I thought it was, but on this ledge here?"

"Y-yes, I do remember, now you mention it, Mr. Swilbey." Karslake spoke as one making a reluctant admission. "Rason, I think you'll have to apologize."

"Wait a minute!" said Rason. "*Suppose* the case on the ledge there, out of which he offered you a cigarette, was his own case? And *suppose* Wain's case, which Swilbey had put in his pocket, had slipped down the lining. And *suppose* —"

"Suppose my grandmother's foot!" Swilbey emitted a roar of laughter. "Karslake, haven't you taught this man any evidence?" Swilbey leaned forward in the direction of Rason. "My good man! If you could prove that I put Wain's cigarette case in my pocket — eighteen months ago, mark you! — we would not be talking about it. Mr. Karslake would charge me with murder — wouldn't you, Karslake?"

"Yes," said Chief Inspector Karslake. In sudden silence, the distant rumble of traffic seemed to fill the vast drawing-room. Presently Karslake added: "Perhaps you'd like to ring the bell, Swilbey, and tell them to pack you a suitcase?"

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—Continued on inside cover

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